



Qualia *the* Purple

THE NOVEL

WRITTEN BY

Hisamitsu Ueo

ILLUSTRATED BY

Shirou Tsunashima





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Qualia
the Purple





Tenjou Nanami

A girl with a grudge against Yukari.

Alice Foyle

An exchange student from America.

Marii Yukari

A girl who says that all people other than herself look like robots.

Hatou Manabu

Yukari's classmate and friend.

Kasoku Tomonori

A classmate who appears undistinguished, and yet...

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Seven Seas Entertainment

MURASAKIIRO NO QUALIA

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This and That About Marii





Introduction: Who Is Marii Yukari?

TO MARI YUKARI, all humans look like robots.

That is an essential part of her cognition that cannot be changed no matter what.

And I am her friend.

Chapter 1: Marii's Premise

MARIYUKARI says all humans look like robots.

Technically, this extends to more than just humans: she thinks everything alive—other than her—is a robot.

She truly means all other living things, and there is no way for anyone else to ascertain whether that's fact or fiction. It might sound ridiculous, but think about it like this: you look at a red apple and perceive it as red, but how would you explain that to someone unfamiliar with what that looks like? How do you express your impression of "red" other than to just say the word "red"? No matter how many words or phrases you use, you'll never be able to properly express your impression of red. Marii Yukari's perception is just like that. There's no way for her to show others what she means.

So all she can say is "I don't have proof, but to me, all living things look like robots."

Since Yukari has no way of conveying her experience to another person, she can't prove it; you just have to take her word for it. That's the situation. Plus, if you're her friend—and not merely an acquaintance—then you've gotta truly, *actually* believe it. No matter how hard it is to believe, you have to do so unconditionally.

But I think that's something that probably comes inevitably with being a friend, to some extent.

"Um, Gaku-chan...correct me if I'm wrong, but is this yours?"

"Yukari... Look. How many times do I have to tell you? I'm not made using screws."

"Oh! That's right. Humans are really so amazing."

"I...guess so."

You have to be like that if you want to get anywhere with her.

Chapter 2: Marii is Cute

MARIYUKARI is really cute.

She's small overall. (I'm an average-sized girl, and Marii barely reaches my chin, no matter how straight she stands up.) She reminds me of a small animal, which might have something to do with her long, naturally wavy hair. It spreads out all around looking so fluffy and soft, and in the light, it sparkles like the waves of the sea under the bright sun.

It's not just her hair that's attractive. Yukari's face is quite nice, too.

Yukari says others look like robots, but personally, I think *she* looks like a doll. Not just a ready-made doll off the shelf, but a made-to-order porcelain bisque doll. And when I say she looks like a doll, I mean she looks perfect—not that she's lacking in expression. She's more animated than anyone else I know. I never get tired of watching how her face moves in so many different ways in such a short time. It's more the cuteness of a kid than that of a woman, but then again, we *are* still junior high school students. As someone who apparently has RBF by default, I have to admit that I'm a little jealous of her cute smiles.

But you know, the grass is always greener on the other side—even for Yukari and her unique eyes.

"It's nice of you to say that, Gaku-chan, but I still wish I was like you. Your face barely moves, and you look like you could tolerate radioactivity."

"If it was anyone else, I'd take that as an insult, you know."

"Oh! No! I didn't mean it like that! Um, I, uh, what I mean is—"

Watching her mumble "Oh! Oh!" as she flails around for someone to bail her out makes my chest feel tight. I hold back a sigh.

If you asked ten people about Marii Yukari's appearance, they'd each bring ten friends, and they'd shout a hundred strong that she's cute. Even so, she is alarmingly unaware of the effect she has on others—oblivious even.

It's not that she's particularly modest or self-effacing. Yukari truly believes she isn't cute. How could she, when her eyes don't show her anything in humanity that she can compare to herself?

Apparently, her only knowledge of the "true form" of humans, who otherwise look like robots to her, is her reflection in the mirror and illustrations. Drawings of humans don't look like robots to her, no matter how detailed they are. Conversely, from what she's said, even blurry photographs of humans look robotic to her.

It just goes to show that our sense of beauty is learned from our environment and experiences. After all, the standards of beauty are totally different today from that of the Heian period. Similarly, Yukari and I have different senses of what's attractive. However cute she looks to me, since she grew up surrounded by "robots," she can't help but be insecure about her fluffy hair and pale skin, which to her are just inescapable reminders that she's different from everyone else.

She doesn't think she's cute: instead, Yukari wants to be a robot "like everyone else."

That's why I have to remind her of how I feel.

"Oh! Gaku-chan?" she says in surprise at my embrace.

Whenever I get a chance (like when we're alone), I hug her really tight. I know it doesn't fit the image of "permanently pissy Gaku," and it honestly makes me almost die of embarrassment, but this is how I express to her what my eyes see. Even though there's no way to fully explain it, I still want her to know how I feel inside my heart.

So, this is only when no one's looking, but when I spot the chance, I suck up the embarrassment and tell her.

"Yukari, I think you're cute. No matter what you look like to yourself, I can tell you that *I* think you're super cute."

"Oh! How embarrassing...!"

Yukari looks down shyly, and her cheeks glow pink. I like to think that's a sign not just of embarrassment but also of her own happiness. Even so, I still don't think I'm getting my message across exactly. I can't make her understand.

So instead of relying on words, I hug her tight and pray.

Let my feelings reach her. Have more confidence in yourself.

Yukari really is as cute as anyone. How can I make her believe it?

She doesn't fuss over clothes, because she sees her looks as a lost cause. I mean, when Yukari tries, she ends up looking like she's trying to cosplay as a robot. She focuses instead on being neat and clean. Yet somehow she doesn't like baths and can't take one by herself. She told me when her family can't meet her needs, she takes a shower instead. Apparently, she's skeptical about the human body being able to float, and she doesn't trust her exterior and interior waterproofing. She needs someone else there in case water leaks into her body.

"How is it that no one else has a problem? Gaku-chan, you look so heavy...! Oh! That's not what I meant. Are you mad? I mean..."

I'm not actually mad (I mean, why would I be at this point?), but Yukari looks so adorable and cutesy as she waves around exclaiming, "Oh! Oh! Oh!" that I can't help but give her a good, long stare. The surly look is so baked into my gaze, I guess it must look like a glare. It's not what I'm going for, but it's on my face before I even realize I'm staring at her.

"So, um, what I mean is, I'm not saying you look *heavy*. I'm just saying you look that way to me—oh! No—I don't mean you *look* like that! I, uh... Ah, what do I do...?"

Yukari's downright adorable when she panics like that. It makes me want to feed her by hand, like a small animal. I can't tear my gaze away from her.

With my focused stare on her, I think, *Yukari looks cute the way she is. Maybe I don't have to tell her.*

Chapter 3: Marii's Sensation

WHEN I HUG Marii Yukari from behind, the scent of shampoo and soap invades my senses.

It's a sign of how much she cares about cleanliness. It's a good thing to pay attention to, but knowing her reasoning being one of valuing cleanliness to make up for her looks wells up a deep sadness in me that I'm forced to push down. I dig my face into her hair and neck, looking for her own natural smell, longing to know the real scent of her. Once I realize what I'm doing, I get embarrassed and ask myself what the heck I'm doing to a girl. Back at home, in my bed, I flap around hating myself. But even so, almost every day, I hug her and whisper into her ear, "Yukari, you're so cute."

When I do that, she squirms around for a while, but then she turns around and hugs me back.

Apparently, she thinks compliments have to be returned. At first, when I told her she was cute, she'd answer that I was, too. Unfortunately, given that Yukari thinks everyone else looks like a robot, it feels strange when she says someone's cute. She might think it's a compliment, but how would a normal girl react to being told she looks "durable" or "powerful" or like she could "support a lot of peripherals"?

She might tell me, "Gaku-chan, your design is so Super Robot!"

I know it's supposed to be a compliment, but I don't understand what she means in the least. All I can do is say something vague and safe like, "Uh...huh. Right. Thanks...?"

We went through a lot of awkward moments like that. Eventually, Yukari stopped returning the compliments in favor of offering hugs. To be honest, although it's definitely embarrassing, I like that much better.

One reason is that it's hard to know how to react to her replies (what does it mean for a design to be so "Super Robot," anyway?), but honestly, I'm just not a big fan of exchanging compliments: it feels forced to me. Then again, I do feel this weird duty to praise this insecure girl at least once a day (and yes of course I do really mean it), but in general, I'm not the kind of noble person who goes around

praising people. It's *always* embarrassing for me. I mean, it's not like me to do such a thing.

That's how I see it anyway.

Besides, I'm not saying I'm ugly, but I look okay at best. It feels frustrating for a girl as cute as Yukari to praise my appearance. So why engage in this sad exchange of compliments when you could just hug it out, right? Even though it's embarrassing, it gets my feelings across better than relying on words. Or maybe that's just me.

Feeling Yukari's body against mine feels so soft and warm and the aroma of her scent is so nice. I think to myself I'm glad I was born a girl. If one of us were a boy, we couldn't do this so casually, and if we were both boys—yeah...I don't think that would work either. So I take advantage of our same-sex privileges and hug her with all I've got. Meanwhile, it occurs to me, is this what she's thinking, too? To her, am I soft and warm?

Yukari says I look like a robot. (A Super Robot?) Does that mean I *feel* like one, too? To me, she looks like a girl, so I'm holding a girl, but that's not what she sees through her eyes. Would that mean that to Yukari, what's holding her isn't a soft girl, but a cold, hard robot?

I did ask her once, "How do I look to you, specifically?" She just gave me a sad smile, though she did tell me why she wouldn't answer. A friend in elementary school asked her that years ago, and she'd answered. Soon, her friend was far away.

Yukari also told me that she drew a friend once in an art class. Her drawing, naturally, was of a robot. After her friend saw the picture, she hated her and started bullying her.

So that's how Yukari came to hide how she saw the world.

I wonder what that picture looked like. Did it not look like the girl at all? Or was it a picture of a robot that was still recognizable as her? Was it such a creepy drawing that it would actually make someone hate a girl as cute as this one?

I begged Yukari to answer me.

She stated, with equal urgency, "Please don't ask me what you look like."

She seemed so desperate about it, I agreed I'd never ask her again. That said, she's so absent-minded, she keeps letting slip every now and

then stuff about Super Robots and peripherals and whatnot.

Right now, I'm holding a girl who feels great in my very human arms. But how does Yukari see me? Durable and powerful? A Super Robot with lots of parts and peripherals?

I squeeze harder and Yukari squeezes back. I think, *Yes, this is better than words.*

After all, I don't know what this is like from her perspective, but I can tell she's okay with it. From her eyes, I know she accepts it—even wants it.

In conclusion, hugging is better than words.

I'd like to think my feelings get through to her, too.

Chapter 4:

Marii Yukari's Eyes

MARIYUKARI'S IRISES are a pretty purple.

You can't tell from far away. But when she looks at you up close with those clear, pale-purple eyes, you feel like you're being sucked into her distinct pupils, and the next moment you're aware of yourself and there you are, straightening your spine.

So, if you ask someone close to her which of her attributes comes to mind first, they'll probably mention her eyes before her fluffy hair. They'll say something to the extent of "Marii Yukari has purple eyes."

She doesn't like bright light. Sometimes she wears colored glasses or a visor. Those look good on her, but at those times, I also miss seeing her eyes.

I once asked a little-kid kind of question: "Could it be that those eyes are why other people look like robots to you?"

She smiled and told me no. It's true purple eyes are rare, but some people had them without seeing things the way she did.

That makes sense. The real question is not how things look, but how they *feel* to you.

She sounded almost miffed this one time when she said to me, "Sometimes I wonder... Why didn't the god who made me include me in the way I see others? If the human form looks like a robot to me, then you'd think my body would look like a robot too, so why is it just me who doesn't? Is the way I'm shaped unnatural?"

"No, not at all. You look totally normal to me," I replied.

"Okay. Thanks. Then I guess what's weird is not what I see, but what I feel."

She has no fear of the things that her purple eyes show her—she fears what they *don't* show her. She lives in isolation, the only one set apart from everyone else.

To Marii Yukari, she's the abnormal one.

I caught myself asking her this: "Yukari, do you like your eyes?" I

immediately regretted saying that out loud, thinking it was a stupid question, but it was too late to reel my words back in. So, making the best of it, I feigned composure and added, “I like your eyes. The color is so nice, like a violet flower. It suits you really well.”

“Oh! Thanks... Yes, I like my eyes too.”

I haven’t known her long enough to know whether she really meant that. All I can do is hope. I hope she loves her eyes. I bet her parents were entranced by them when she was born, and that’s why they named her Yukari, which means *connection*. One fancy way to write the name is with the Chinese character for *purple*, after a poem about a plant bringing back memories. I truly hope Yukari doesn’t hate them—her pretty purple eyes, I mean.

Not that I’ve told her, but that’s partly why I call her by her given name instead of using her family name, Marii. “Yukari.” I do still feel a little shy whenever I address her so casually.

But I like her purple eyes.

Chapter 5: Marii's Arrival

“**B**Y THE WAY, Gaku-chan, do you like your name?”

“How could I? If I could go back in time, I’d make my parents pick something else.”

“Oh! Ah, but I like it...”

My name is Hatou Manabu, with my given name “Manabu” written using the Chinese character for *study*. Apologies to any other ladies with this name, but it absolutely sucks. I mean, Manabu’s normally a masculine name, after all. I don’t know if this is some ancient sacred tradition or what, but my grandma gave it to me. Thanks to that, I’ve been mistaken for a boy countless times! And can you guess how many times I’ve been teased? It’s got to be this name that’s cursed me with such a foul expression on my face by default. It had to be my name that’s led me to barely act feminine at all!

I could tell people to call me Mana, but that’s a little too girly for me. And I’d die of embarrassment to bring it up at this point, so instead I ask friends to use my family name or my nickname, Gaku, which also means *study*.

“But you know, Gaku-chan, I got interested in you *because* of your name being Manabu.”

“That was because your eyes couldn’t tell whether I was a boy or a girl, right?”

“Oh, no! I always thought you were a girl! You were wearing a skirt, after all.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better...?”

Most people find it easy to determine someone’s gender (well, maybe not so much these days), but Yukari struggles due to the way she sees others. Robots are sexless, so she relies on a ratio of 60 percent silhouette, 20 percent on naming conventions, and the remaining 20 percent on the clothes a person is wearing (like pants means the person is a boy, but a skirt means the person is a girl).

I have a masculine name. I also have a low, boyish voice—even

more confusing when surrounded by boys whose voices haven't dropped in range yet. I have an androgynous silhouette (yeah, I've got small boobs, but get off my case! I'm still growing...) and even when I was wearing a skirt, Yukari couldn't figure out my gender, despite what she says now. She couldn't get it off of her mind back then.

Yukari had checked the class roster, but that didn't solve the mystery for her, so she followed me from the shadows. I was clueless the whole time until I bumped into her in a dramatic way. You could say that was my first kiss, if such a thing counts with a girl.

Yukari was shocked to the point of tears by this encounter in a way that was practically out of a manga. As I struggled to sort things out with her, I noticed her purple eyes. Then I ended up having this kind of change of heart and growing my hair longer. (It was really short and now it's styled in a bob, leading at least one heartless jerk to call me...you guessed it, Bob.) Anyway, she had a point that we sort of met because of my name.

"Well, I guess after fourteen years, I'm used to this name by now," I say.

"But I wish you'd actually *like* your name. I like it a lot," Yukari says.

"Uh...thanks."

"You know what? If it's okay with you, I'd like to call you Manabu-chan, please."

"That's, uh... I'm not...just...ugh, gimme a break..."

I purse my lips and look away all pissed to avoid seeing her look up at me like that. I wonder what I can do to hide my hot cheeks. They're probably as red as a tomato.

Manabu-chan, huh?

Well, hmm... I guess I don't hate it as much as I used to.

Chapter 6: Marii's Rival

YOU PROBABLY get the point by now, but Marii Yukari thinks humans look like robots.

I found that out by coincidence, but she generally hides it. She's learned from experience that people will think she's weird, and it causes unnecessary trouble.

That's her intention, anyway, but things are easier said than done. Her unique perspective inexplicably makes her act in pretty strange ways. She's known as a weirdo not only in school but throughout the entire neighborhood.

That doesn't mean people don't like her—in fact, they love her. Our class treats her kind of like a mascot. Her eccentricities are actually kind of amusing, but that shouldn't come as a surprise. She's so cute that her bizarre words and actions only highlight the vibe that she's kind of like a harmless pet.

I'm not trying to say this world is all about looks, but you have to admit that appearances are pretty critical to our decision-making. That gives Yukari a lot of trouble as someone who thinks she's interacting with a bunch of robots. As for the rest of us, living beings have an instinct to protect things that are cute in order to keep on passing our genes down. It's the way of the world, you could say. So it's no wonder that Yukari's well liked: I don't think there's anything wrong with me for always paying attention to her.

However, another truth about this world is that there will always be strange people who just can't accept others. Some people have it out for her. It's not that they all want to hurt her, but more that they find Yukari...irritating. Foremost among them is a girl named Tenjou Nanami.

Tenjou would get on Yukari's case over anything and everything. She wouldn't even necessarily wait to naturally come across her in the halls—heck, she'd come all the way over to our class for no reason during breaks sometimes. She was never violent toward Yukari, but she'd block her way, take her notebook, taunt her like a child...

“Oh my, it’s been a while, hasn’t it, Mari?” Tenjou would call Yukari by her family name, but she pronounced it as if it was her given name with a shortened final syllable. “How’s that third eye they say you’re hiding on your forehead?”

“I’m not hiding a third eye!”

“Oh? Is that so? Ah, that’s right. You had it in your past life, and now you’re fighting the demons night and day without it. I suppose the exorcist’s seal etched into your arm must be aching right now.”

“I don’t have anything like that...”

Let’s just say it: the way she picks on Yukari is really childish. It’s much more like a playground squabble than actual bullying. People generally don’t do anything to stop it—that includes me—because the whole thing feels too silly in the first place. Plus, Yukari was trying to be friends with Tenjou, so when you try to stand up for Yukari, she ends up defending Tenjou anyway. It’s this weird triangle that makes you out as the stupid one for getting involved. That’s why people usually sit and watch as Tenjou picks on her.

But there was one time when Yukari fired back at Tenjou in anger.

“Why don’t you go back to your homeland?” Tenjou had asked.

“My homeland...?”

“You’re a *Marian*, aren’t you? You’re a Marian from the planet Mari. What are you doing still on Earth? Don’t you think it’s about time you went back to your home? What, are you planning an inva—”

“I’m an Earthling!” Yukari shot back strongly.

Her exclamation was loud enough to bring the lunchtime noise of the classroom to a complete halt. Yukari usually didn’t like being the center of attention and would shrink from notice, but this time was different. Barely seeming to notice the eyes on her, Yukari continued on.

“I-I’m not a Marian! I’m an Earthling born on the planet Earth. I’m Japanese!”

“I mean, whatever...”

“Enough already!” I interrupted. “This isn’t even your classroom, Tenjou. Don’t come here to start trouble.”

Tenjou shot me one heck of a glare as she loudly marched out of

the room.

I broke character and chased after her. Feelings were swirling in my chest, ready to burst free. Most days, I'm sullen and don't know how to express myself: maybe that's why, when I get overwhelmed like that, I can't control my reaction. On this occasion, I saw Yukari grimace, an unusual expression for her.

It's things like this that get me heated.

I guess Tenjou realized I was coming, because she was waiting for me at the bottom of the staircase, alone. Before I could ask her anything, she said to me, "Your name was...Hatou? Do you know about her eyes?"

If she was asking that, she clearly knew about them herself.

By that point, I'd kind of figured out that Tenjou knew, considering how much she teased Yukari. She always sounded like she was mocking what Yukari saw. Both Tenjou and I knew that Yukari saw humans—other than herself—as robots, and about the fact that she'd never seen a human who looked like herself.

You should be able to imagine just how lonely that vista would be.

Yukari's retort to Tenjou wasn't "I'm a human." She claimed to be an Earthling and Japanese, but not a *human*. She wasn't able to claim that. So long as she couldn't find anyone who looked like her, her heart would always stop her from truly feeling human.

My rage boiled up again, but my head somehow cooled off. My thoughts came into focus. I nodded slowly in reply. "Yes, I know. I know how Yukari sees other people...so you know too, huh? Then you have some nerve, Tenjou, to say things like—"

Tenjou shut me up immediately with an eerie smile as if she was sizing me up. "You're right. I know *plenty* about her. Much more than you do, I'd wager—and actually, I think you barely know her at all."

"What do you mean?"

"Are you sure you wanna know? If you plan to be her friend, you're better off not knowing."

"What are you—"

Before Tenjou could open her mouth, a voice from up the hall

called, “Gaku-chan!” It was Yukari. She must have chased after me.

By the way, my family runs a *naginata* dojo. I’m a bit of a polearm wielder myself. I lack the spiritual discipline, though, so I tend to fight impulsively. Yukari might have been afraid I’d hurt Tenjou.

Seeing Yukari arrive panicked and out of breath, Tenjou violently scowled. Until that moment, I suspected that Tenjou didn’t really hate Yukari as much as she made it seem. At the time, I thought maybe she was acting like a little kid who couldn’t be honest with their feelings. But now I could see the grave and remorseful expression on Tenjou’s face as she looked at Yukari. And yet Tenjou was also somehow as cool as blue fire. Her face was stretched so taut, it looked like it could split apart at any second. It definitely seemed to be—no, it *was* a look of pure hatred. She was ready to practically spit at Yukari.

“Uh, um, Ten-chan...”

Tenjou’s expression shifted at Yukari’s murmur, but I didn’t know how to describe it. She bobbed her head subtly. Tenjou was...lowering her head? Perhaps she was apologizing for what just happened? It lasted for the briefest of moments before she raised her head again to glare at Yukari. She spat out deliberately, “You should know I’m never going to forgive you or accept *you*.” Then she sharply turned and began to walk away.

“Hey, Tenjou!” I yelled at her, partly because I was still pissed off, but most of all because I wanted to know what exactly she meant.

Yukari stopped me, though. “Please stop, Gaku-chan. It’s okay. You see, I did something to Ten-chan. She has every right to hate me for it. So it’s okay, really. Please don’t be mad...”

Tenjou started to turn back toward us for a second, but in the end, she went on her way.

As I watched Tenjou leave, I asked Yukari, “So I guess you two go way back, right? She knows all about you?”

“Yes. She knows me better than anyone.”

“But...you’re not friends anymore.”

“Oh! I still think of her as my friend, and honestly, I hope you can be her friend too.”

“Over my dead body. Count me out.”

“Oh, don’t be like that...”

Yukari looked up at me sadly, and I patted her on the top of head.

What exactly was it that Tenjou was treating as a mystery when it came to Yukari? Sure, I hadn’t known her that long; there was plenty I didn’t know about her. Whatever, I understood what was most important about Yukari: Even if she isn’t totally normal, Yukari is still a human just like me, and she’s my dear friend.

I don’t know what happened between you two, but you don’t get to tell me my own feelings, I thought in Tenjou’s direction.

Even after that day, Tenjou went on holding that bitter grudge against Yukari. She started teasing me too. Maybe it’s more like I was the one who stepped into the fray. Sometimes she faces off with me, even when Yukari’s not around. Come to think of it, she’s been doing that a lot lately. I’ll give her credit for not telling people about Yukari’s secret at least, but otherwise, we don’t get along at all.

And that’s how things have continued on between me and Tenjou Nanami.

Chapter 7: Marii's Talent

I'M REALLY SORRY for beating a dead horse here, but Marii Yukari *really* does see other people as robots.

I don't know if that's what gave her a deep fascination and passion for robots, but she loves building model kits. Heck, she'll build any kind of robot. In fact, she'll build any kind of model too, whether it's a tank or a castle. It's mainly plastic models, mind you, but still: she'll build whatever.

Yukari lives in a house with a little yard, where she has a little shed and workshop with a bunch of tools and equipment I don't know how to use. The shed's packed full of all kinds of plastic robots. The ones that won't fit in the shed go up on the roof like gargoyles or out in the yard like lawn gnomes. They're all over the place!

It's not that she wanted all the finished models—I mean, she *does* like robots—but it's the process of putting them together that she values so much.

Yukari has a little brother and a little sister—Aoi and Akane—who are in elementary school. They love her to death. Those two introduced her to lots of little kids who can't complete a robot by themselves because they don't have the time, skill, or patience. She likes spending her weekends putting together their robots, and now a bunch of kids know her—especially the boys, of course. But even the girls who don't care about robots can't help wanting to watch her do her builds. I mean, I was like that when I first saw her at work.

It was the start of summer vacation. I stopped by in the morning, and there were more than fifty model kits piled up in front of her workshop. *Man, kids are lazy these days*, I thought. *Sure, it's summer vacation, but isn't Yukari overdoing it?* But she didn't flinch before the soaring tower of model kits. (Those model kits take up a lot of space...) She looked like she was almost drooling as she faced the mountain of plastic parts.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" I asked.

"Oh! Really?" She smiled. "If you want, there's a wire cutter there."

Could you cut all the parts out from the runners?”

The runners are the plastic frames that the parts come connected to. Plastic models come with instructions that tell you how to cut the parts from the runners and assemble them in order, but this girl doesn't read the directions. No, she delightedly took all the runners out from the different boxes and snipped out the parts one after the other, not box by box. She was mixing them all together, and she didn't care that she wasn't keeping the parts ordered by model kit. She grabbed each runner arbitrarily, snipped out the parts, and piled them all on a plastic sheet with zero organization.

“Oh, Gaku-chan, some of the parts are small, so be careful not to miss any, okay?”

“Uh, wait, is it really okay to pile them together like that? I don't know how you're going to be able to tell which—”

“Don't worry,” she reassured me. “I know what I'm doing when it comes to model kits!”

As if to demonstrate this, as soon as all the parts were off the runners, she started putting them together without a glance at the boxes or the instructions. She'd pick one part off the chaotic pile and look at it quizzically. Then she'd put it aside, take another part, and put that one aside too. Or she'd try putting it together with one of the parts she'd already put aside. It was less like a model kit and more like a jigsaw puzzle. She arbitrarily grabbed parts, put them together, and built on what worked. It looked ridiculously haphazard, yet her hands moved swiftly, never stopping. Her confusion lasted only as long as it took for her to get started. Before I knew it, her fingers were moving in flowing motions to put together the robots. It seemed that despite having piled the parts with no rhyme or reason, she still knew where they were and how they should go together.

Ten minutes after she'd started, the first robot was done. The second stood beside it within another seven.

For all that speed, her work didn't look the least bit rough or sloppy, not even when she quickly used a rasp, glue, and clay as she assembled the robots rapidly without missing a single beat.

I was dumbstruck. “It looks like there are a bunch of different kinds of robots here. Do you know them all? Have you built them all before?”

“Mmm...” was all she said at first. Looking at the boxes placed aside while still working, she answered, “I’ve built some of them before, but I think most of them I haven’t. Lots are new products.”

“You’ve never built them AND you’ve never seen them before, but you know what you’re doing? You know which parts go with which without looking at the manual?”

“Hmm, more or less. I have seen what they’re supposed to look like on the box, and...well, you might think at a glance that all there is to a robot is looking cool, but actually all of these are intentionally designed around certain themes, you know? There’s a reason why they’re built the way they are. Like, this robot’s supposed to fly, so that’s why it looks like this. The important part for this joint is speed, so that’s why it’s like this, or, this armor is supposed to look like a lion. Once you understand the theme, it’s obvious how to put the various parts together.”

“Yeah, but...wow, Yukari...”

She made it sound so easy, but not just anyone could do this. This was virtuosity if I ever saw it. I let out a sigh of amazement.

Yukari smiled bashfully as soon as she noticed my reaction. Meanwhile, her hands launched one more robot into the world. She shook her head. “To be honest, I mess up a lot. Sometimes I ask someone about a model, and what I thought was supposed to be a bird was really an angel, or sometimes there’s really no reason behind the design at all. In the end, it’s just a matter of experience.”

Well, yeah. Given that she saw all living things as robots, she had the most experience of anyone ever. So, this was a talent that her unique perspective gave her, one that she should be proud of.

I started getting excited for some reason. I mussed her hair roughly and said, “Anyway, that’s amazing! You’re amazing! You should do this for a living.”

“Oh! I wonder if I could. I’d like to try being a modeler.”

“A...modeler? You mean a *model*?”

“A modeler is someone who designs models.”

“Oh, then yeah! You can totally do it. You could be a modeler *or* a model, Yukari! You’re so good at making these!”

Those purple eyes of hers would help her achieve her dreams, and

I'd be overjoyed to see it. I was so happy imagining the future that I couldn't contain my glee. I mussed her hair some more, but this time, she stopped me. She pensively observed the model boxes stacked in the corner. She looked at them for a long time before saying, "But I guess I'd have to catch up with mecha anime and stuff for that."

"Well, yeah, I guess. Not that I'd know. But wait, Yukari, I figured you of all people would be obsessed with those shows."

"Ah, they're rather...violent."

"Huh, you think so? But they're, like, for kids, right?"

"But they're so violent. So, I just buy the models without watching the shows. I imagine in my head what kind of robots they must be and what they must do while I'm building them. Then later I talk to someone who's seen the show and see if I got it right."

"Hmm."

The box Yukari was staring at showed a manly looking robot with mechanical wings. In one hand it held a glowing stick—a sword maybe?—and it was posing triumphantly. It was surrounded by bits of broken robots. They must have been the main character's enemies, now all strewn about as mangled remains.

This was just a picture, a picture of *things*. There was no blood or anything, but...

Finally Yukari got back to building, picking up one part after the other, putting them together quickly but precisely, and occasionally polishing them with a cloth. There was a kindness in her fingers that showed me that she really loved robots and building them.

Without thinking, I muttered, "Maybe I should have you build one for me..."

Yukari immediately pounced. "Really? Then let's go buy you one later! You know what? There's this new one, and it's *perfect* for you! I mean, I don't know much about what it's like, but it sounds so cool...!"

Pretty much any kind of robot is cool to Yukari, I chuckled to myself.

To her, all robots are deserving of love. So anything she builds would be fine with me.

Chapter 8:

Marii the Scientist

THEY SAY there's no time like the present.

So, Yukari finished assembling all the models she'd been asked to build in the morning (I thought she ought to charge for her services, but maybe I have a greedy heart), and then she immediately dragged me off to the model shop and made me buy her recommendation. It used screws and stuff and was bigger and more expensive than I was expecting, but we'll put that aside for now.

After we returned to my house to assemble it, Yukari showed me yet another talent. You see, the air conditioner in my room was broken. We called the repair shop but they said they couldn't come until the evening. That was why I went to Yukari's house in the first place that morning (though I ended up sweating in the yard anyway). However, back at my place, Yukari was all too happy to fix my air conditioner with her model tools alone. She blissfully ignored the "DANGER! DO NOT TOUCH" sticker, took the machine apart into a pile of little pieces, and put it back together in a flash just as if it was one of her models. Oh, and the problem turned out to be a clogged filter.

I was blown away. "Y-you fixed it so easily... Don't you need a license for this or something?"

"Ah, it's something I like to keep a secret from the kids so that they don't try this at home, but I can totally handle home appliances! If I have the parts, I can fix a fridge or a microwave. I can even assemble a computer! Let me know if you ever need anything!"

This must be thanks to her special eyes too. I mean, they're right when they say everyone has a calling. If she can do this as a junior high school student, then I bet she could make actual robots when she grows up! Well—

"My, my, Miss Yukari! You have quite the fine intellect indeed!"

"Oh, Gaku-chan, did you forget how to talk like a teenager?"

Wow, she was kinda obtuse. That actually came as a bit of a shock.

Chapter 9: Marii's Vision

“**U**M, PREZ, my friend has a track meet tomorrow. Is the weather going to be okay?”

“Oho! How well you know the value of friendship, Marii-chan! Yes. Heaven truly smiles down upon you. The way I see it, the weather will be fine and clear from tomorrow morning on.”

“Really? That’s great! But why are you talking like that...?”

“Why you’re asking that so seriously is what I’d like to know.”

Our class president’s weather predictions almost never fail, and that’s why everyone in our class turns to her for that knowledge. Even if the meteorologist on TV says it’ll be fair, if she says it’ll rain, we all bring umbrellas. And the class president generally gives us a good reason to believe her; there’s no mistaking her talent for reading the weather. We tell her she should be an angler, using her weather-reading skills to help her reel in lots of fish, but she ignores our advice and insists she’s going to be a weather forecaster.

I wonder if she’s ever noticed that the one who discovered her talent is Marii Yukari.

Yukari was the first of us who asked her about the weather: naturally, even back then, the class president’s prediction was right. After this was repeated many times, other people started to put their trust in her forecasts, and she gradually became famous. In other words, it was Yukari who spotted her meteorological talent.

When I asked Yukari why she asked her about the weather, she smiled and said, “Well, you see, in my eyes, Prez has the most amazing sensors! I figured it should be easy for her to predict the weather.”

It should go without saying, but I didn’t see any sensors.

The next day, just as the class president had divined, morning

ushered in a clear, blue autumn sky. Yukari gleefully went to cheer for her friend from elementary school who did track, and I went with her. Yukari's friend was so fast that even someone who barely ever ran could tell she was in a whole 'nother league. The enthusiastic roars from the crowd made me imagine her at nationals—not that she needed our cheers to spur her on. I told Yukari it was pretty amazing she had such an amazing friend.

Yukari proudly puffed out her chest. “You know, I’m the one who told Shou-chan she should do track.” (Oh, yeah, “Shou-chan” is the girl’s nickname.) “She couldn’t decide what club to join, and I told her she would be great at track.”

“Was that...you know...? What you saw...?”

Yukari nodded and drew close to my ear. “Between you and me, Shou-chan’s legs have the most amazing rollers and Vernier thrusters on them.”

“Rollers” I could understand. “Vernier thrusters” was something I’d never heard of, but I assumed they were useful for running.

As if to prove Yukari right, Shou-chan launched herself into the wind, immediately rocketing ahead of everyone else. Of course, just like how Yukari talked about the class president having sensors, it wasn’t as if this girl literally had rollers or Vernier thrusters. She had normal human legs. Then again, watching her zoom ahead, it wouldn’t be hard to believe someone insisting the girl literally possessed something like those parts Yukari mentioned.

I was thinking of saying that out loud when Yukari sighed and muttered, “Shou-chan, you could be so much faster if you just used your rollers and Vernier thrusters...”

For some reason, those words sent a chill down my spine.

We were at school, joking around after eating lunch, when I asked Yukari what type of guy she liked. Her cheeks flushed red, and she stared down at the desk. Realizing how warm her face had become, she fanned her hands over her cheeks. She repeated, “Ahhh! Ahhh! Ahhh!” and finally she gave up and admitted it: “...Kasoku-kun.”

I was nearly floored.

Behind me, there was a huge noise. I saw Tenjou was on the floor, holding a desk.

Tenjou noticed we were looking at her and wondering what she was doing in our classroom. She leaped up, set the desk right, dusted off her uniform, shook her head with a “Hmph!” and proceeded out.

Anyway.

Kasoku—full name, Kasoku Tomonori—was an actual guy in our class. As in, he actually existed and was not far away from us.

To be honest, this was unexpected.

Given that humans look like robots to her, I’d figured she’d pull some cool robot frame out of an anime, like the way girls talk about celebrities. But Kasoku-kun? That plodding guy with no presence at all? Yukari liked someone with the personality of—well, I didn’t know, really, but the only impression he made was of having really narrow eyes! That was the most remarkable thing about him: he really had zero distinguishing characteristics. But Yukari liked *him*? That freaking Kasoku! What kind of trick did he pull to seduce my innocent-as-a-kid Yukari? Or does he look cool in her purple eyes?

Humans sure do lose control of their bodies when faced with an utterly incomprehensible situation. I slumped deep into my chair and sprawled over my desk. “K-Kasoku? *That* Kasoku? The utterly bland guy? Why?!”

Yukari struggled for words for a bit. “Um, you know how they say drills are the stuff of men’s dreams? Well, it’s not just men who like drills. I think they’re pretty dreamy too.”



“Uh, what?”

“Kasoku-kun basically has a realistic robotic design, but he’s got these *amazing* drills. They’re so big and shiny. I get the shivers just looking at them. Like, right now, they’re stopped, but when they start spinning, you’d better watch out...!”

Kasoku was eating with his back to us. I stared at him closely but of course, did not see any drills.

“I don’t really get it...but wouldn’t that make him dangerous? Drills are weapons, right?” I asked.

“Oh! You have it all wrong! Drills are tools. And, I mean...they’re really dreamy.”

What did she mean by *dreamy*...?

Still faintly blushing, Yukari went on. “I mean, Kasoku-kun isn’t the only one with drills, but his are the best. Then again, I guess the class president comes close...”

“The class president? She has them too? She’s a girl, you know. Didn’t you say they’re the stuff of *men’s* dreams?”

“Yeah. Unlike Kasoku-kun’s, hers are always spinning. But they go so fast! It’s like they’re not even moving. They’re so smooth, like a blade of ice. They make me nervous whenever I’m in front of her.”

“Uh...what about me? Do I have anything like that?”

Yukari had forbidden me from asking about myself, but I’d forgotten until after I’d already opened my big mouth.

Yukari, swept up in the conversation, answered without hesitation. “You don’t have any drills, but you can’t be beat for your multipurpose capabilities.”

“M-multipurpose capabilities?!”

“Yeah. You have this amazing switch system that would allow you to operate on land, sea, and air, or even in a vacuum or in lava, just by switching out your equipment. You could serve well at any range. This is something you should be proud of! That kind of adaptability is... Oh! Hey! You can’t ask that, Gaku-chan!”

“Oops, sorry.”

Switch system, multipurpose capabilities—what she said was full of

unusual terms, yet it strangely rang true. Bypassing logic, I was able to accept that, yeah, I might be like that as a robot. I felt as if she'd hit the nail on the head about a version of me I didn't know.

This was how she perceived the world, huh?

"Well, if I've got this switch system, can I switch in a drill?"
I asked.

"Oh! Gaku-chan, do you think they're dreamy too?"

"Uh, no, I was just curious..."

Incidentally, after this day, Tenjou started including not just Yukari and me but even Kasoku in her attacks. I can't say it's fair...but hey, with those mighty drills of his, Kasoku ought to be able to pierce right through without our help.

It was the day a suspect was first apprehended in what everyone was calling the Tokyo Ripper case. Yukari's family members were all away on a camping excursion for the elementary schoolers, so I was at Yukari's house, planning to spend the night. We slept over at each other's houses pretty often, but my place had a noisy dojo attached to it: hers had two loud little kids who wouldn't leave their big sister alone. I was looking forward to having some quiet time alone with her, but when I arrived around noon, she seemed on edge. She stayed that way.

The Tokyo Ripper arrest was in the morning paper and on the midday news. Yukari was glued to the TV. She barely replied when I talked to her. When the news wrapped up, she changed the channel to see if another station was covering the case. Once she'd confirmed the TV news reports had finished their coverage, Yukari spread out the newspaper and practically bored a hole through the picture of the suspect. She seemed so distraught over it. I didn't ask her about it, though. I just watched.

Then she told me, "Excuse me for a second," got a look of determination, and started placing a call. She walked out into the yard with the portable receiver, like she didn't want me to hear her conversation. I lay down on the veranda, observing the plastic model robots in front of me while passively catching some of what Yukari was

saying.

“Hello... Yes, this is Marii. Well... Yes, I saw it in the paper, but... he doesn't look like the culprit in my eyes.”

I jolted upright and looked at Yukari.

Yukari had already hung up. She caught my gaze and smiled weakly at me. “Sorry, Gaku-chan. Ah, some people are going to be coming tonight.”

They arrived earlier, actually—they reached her house in the evening. There were two of them, a middle-aged man perfectly decked out in a suit and a somewhat younger man who gave off a vague sense of unreliability. Somehow I knew they were with the police before they even introduced themselves.

The two men came from the yard up by the veranda. They were surprised and hesitant when they noticed me. The young guy with the briefcase started saying something with a scary expression, but the older guy stopped him. He probably noticed how Yukari had grabbed my elbow with her fingers, consciously or unconsciously trying to hide behind me.

The middle-aged guy asked, “Is everything okay?”

Yukari jumped away from me. Before she answered, I nodded to her and linked my arm with hers to show I wasn't going anywhere.

The older guy fell quiet for a bit before he was ready to continue. With a single nod, standing in front of the veranda and making no move to come inside, he said, “All right, Marii-san, let's get this over and done with. I'm sorry for everything, but...let's begin.”

He turned to the young guy, who handed Yukari an envelope from his briefcase, while saying to me, “I advise you not to look.”

From the corner of my eyes, I could see a large number of predominantly red photographs emerge from the envelope.

Red blood.

Red, red severed flesh.

All kinds of red. Deep red, pale red, all shades decorating discolored skin. It only took a glance for me to realize these were shots of a murder scene, probably from the Tokyo Ripper case—not movie props.

It was all very real.

I hurried to look away. My consciousness was getting fuzzy around the edges. I would have fainted right then and there were it not for Yukari's warmth. She took my arm, not so much hooking it in hers as squeezing it, as she looked at the pictures in her hands. Her body trembled, but her purple eyes stayed steady. I made up my mind then that if I couldn't stand to look straight at the photos, I had to do what I could to support Yukari.

I don't know how much time passed, but after a while, Yukari said, "I'm finished studying these."

She handed off the pictures, and the young man said, "Have a look at these," as he handed her a binder.

I braced myself for more horrors, but it turned out to be a scrapbook of photos of several different people. Were these dossiers or something? There were profiles of five people who each had something that looked like résumés with photos showing them from the chest up. There was no pattern among them: a middle-aged woman, an aging man, a girl in a sailor-style school uniform, just to name a few. They must not have been the original copies, because everything except the photos had been crossed out so you couldn't read their name or address. Each of the documents had a few photos from different angles attached.

Yukari examined the photos and, staring intently at each one again and again. At last she pointed to one. "This is it," she said.

The young man said incredulously, "Th-this girl?"

It was the sailor-style uniform girl, who had to be a minor—a high school girl at the oldest. The older officer didn't flinch, but the young guy was obviously flustered by Yukari's declaration.

But Yukari wasn't shaken. She said, "Yes. I think it must be her. Of these people, she is the only one I can imagine causing this kind of destruction." Then she shook her head with a panicked "Oh!" and added, "Um, that's...just the way it looks to me. I can't really say—"

"We know. We're only using your opinion as a reference, Marii-san. Whatever happens, you don't need to trouble yourself over it." The man hesitated. "But I am sorry to involve you, a minor—"

"No. Don't worry about it. After all, I'm the one who called you about this."

The two men took their leave from there. They never did leave the yard to come fully inside. And actually, Yukari's parents called her from their campsite just as the pair was leaving, so I ended up being the one seeing the guys off. It was already nighttime. The sun had gone to sleep when I wasn't looking.

Just as the older guy was about to get into the car waiting in front, he turned to me and mumbled, "Do you...well, know about Marii-san?"

"Yes. I know."

He shrugged my words off with a "Hmm," took a cigarette from his shirt pocket, and lit it. The lit end was so red against the dark night. The older guy took a long drag, let out the smoke, and then for some reason, abandoned the cigarette into a portable ashtray he took out from his pocket. He made eye contact with me again and said, "Marii-san's eyes are a gift that's hard to come by."

"I suppose so, yeah," I said.

"I hope...you can support her properly."

"I will, definitely."

The man nodded, smiled in a way that looked self-deprecating, got in the car, and left.

I watched the taillights until they disappeared. Then I went back to where Yukari was waiting for me.

One week later, the newspaper reported that the suspect in the Tokyo Ripper case had been released.

Yukari might have been a goddess at assembling model kits and home appliances, but she had other more important skills. Her ability to see living things as robots was, in itself, her true talent—the heavenly blessing that made her who she was, and also a curse. She had no

option to reject it or turn her back on it. All of her happiness and misery depended on this talent of hers, so she had no choice but to accept it unconditionally. To reject fully it would be to reject Marii Yukari as a whole.

So I won't reject it. I'll accept it.

I'll never reject her purple eyes.

Chapter 10: Marii the Science Fiction Entity?

IT HAPPENED at lunch one day.

Tenjou Nanami was eating lunch with us, and for once, she wasn't picking a fight with anyone, though she did make some jabs. Upon finishing her lunch, she smirked and said, "By the way, Mari, lately I've been getting into sci-fi."

Oh, now you're getting to whatever it is you've been acting all nice for? I cringed to myself, but Yukari urged Tenjou on excitedly.

With a smile betraying a wicked inner malice, Tenjou continued. "Mari, have you ever entertained the idea that it's not that you see humans as robots, but that what you see is actually how they *really* are?"

"What...?"

"In other words, we just think we're humans, but actually, we're really robots. Perhaps even robot invaders sent from space to take over the world, you know?"

"Robot invaders?"

"That's right! Robots made to look exactly like humans, so they can infiltrate human society. And even given human memories so no one can tell the difference between us and them. Humans any way you look at us! We don't remember about it, but in time, the aliens will send the signal to awaken the robots' true memories, and then we'll begin the invasion. But no one realizes it. You're the only one who can see us for what we are. Only you see the truth, and only you can save this planet. No, wait, what about *this*? The invasion is already over, and we're just robots who think we're human. You're the only real human left on all of Earth. So, Mari, what would you do if that's true?"

What the hell are you talking about? I was pissed, but Yukari gave Tenjou a long look and smile.

"You know, Ten-chan...well, I don't know if this might hurt Gaku-chan's feelings, but..."

"What?"

“I’ve never thought that what I saw wasn’t real in the first place.”

Yukari’s purple eyes were so clear and awe-inspiring as she said it.

Then I thought to myself, *Yukari’s so strong, though now that I think about it, it makes sense. It’s got to be difficult when others see things so differently from you. Yukari’s made it through that loneliness, so there’s no way she’d be weak. There’s no way she ever could’ve been weak. I don’t think she’ll buckle no matter what those purple eyes show her. If anyone’s going to buckle, it’s not her.*

It’s everyone else.

Chapter 11: Marii's Landscape

I LIKED THIS LITTLE HILL on the way from my house to Yukari's place. I can see Yukari's house below when looking from the top, and also, there were plenty of trees that provided good shade to rest in. Whenever I went to Yukari's house, whether invited or unannounced, I'd always stop there along the way to take in the view. Sometimes Yukari was in the yard, watering the plants, building models, fixing appliances, or playing with her brother or sister. I like to hang out there on the hill and watch her.

Okay, so...maybe I'm a bit of a stalker. But what can I say? It was relaxing to watch something little like Yukari scampering around like that. It just makes you feel all warm 'n fuzzy inside.

All right, all right I know: that's just an excuse. It's socially unacceptable, so when I spotted someone already there that time, I got this complicated, embarrassed-yet-angry feeling and an urge to run away. But before I could do just that, Yukari spotted me and said, "Oh, hey, Bob."

"Don't call me Bob. No one else does but you, Tenjou."

It was too late to hide, so I grudgingly walked my bike up next to Tenjou. What was this jerk doing here, anyway?

I spotted Yukari in the yard, working on her bike. We had plans to spend the day cycling together. She had a huge smile on her face as she spun the rear wheel of the upended bicycle. I started grinning myself until I remembered that Tenjou was next to me. I rushed to wipe the goofy look off my face.

But really, what was Tenjou doing in my special place? Was she here by coincidence, or did she come here knowingly? It was a pretty awesome spot. Maybe Tenjou occasionally came here to watch Yukari outside her house just like I did. In that case, maybe we'd actually met here before without me realizing it. Maybe she knew all about how I'd stare from up here for a long time.

...Talk about awkward.

I glared at Tenjou. She was facing forward beside me, giving me a good look at her profile. At that moment, she stole my breath away. Tenjou seemed so very sad as she focused on Yukari's house. She reminded me of a little kid about to break down in tears.

Before I knew it, I was barking at her, "Why don't you just freaking make up with her already?!"

"H-huh?"

"I don't know what happened between you and Yukari, but dragging it on forever like this is so *stupid*."

They must have been close back in the day—until Yukari apparently did something to Tenjou. Then all of a sudden, they weren't friends. It wasn't that they weren't close, but that Tenjou saw Yukari as her enemy. Girls are like that though, fighting forever over nothing. It's not a foreign concept to me, but even so, Tenjou's behavior made no sense at all.

In most cases, it didn't seem like Tenjou really hated Yukari, but more like she couldn't be honest with her own feelings. Then there were times when her expression seemed to contradict that, times when Tenjou would glare at Yukari as if her ex-friend had murdered her parents or something, completely rejecting her with the attitude of someone who's just encountered a monster. That was hatred, pure and simple. Even as a kid, I could see how fierce that inner violence was burning—but I couldn't understand why so much of that negativity was directed at Yukari. It completely defied my imagination.

Could it be that, when we both looked at Yukari, we saw something different?

"Geez Hatou, you're the one who still doesn't have a clue," Tenjou said.

"You're still going on about that? What exactly am I not understanding?"

"Have you heard of a philosophical zombie?"

I was *completely* taken off guard. "What?"

Tenjou smiled wryly. "To put it simply, a philosophical zombie is a being that sees an apple and understands that logically it's red, but they can't actually know that for themselves."

"Okay...?"

“In terms of appearance and behavior, a philosophical zombie is impossible to distinguish from a normal human being. And don’t get confused by the word ‘zombie,’ either. They’re not reanimated corpses or anything. They show emotions, just like the rest of us. They laugh, they cry, they get mad, and when they see an apple, they say it’s so red and it looks delicious. But the thing is, they don’t actually perceive it as red or delicious at all. Why? Because they have no concrete, sensory concept of redness or deliciousness,” Tenjou explained.

“For example, when we see something delicious, we drool. Why? Because it’s delicious, which we know from firsthand *experience*. But a philosophical zombie drools because it understands deliciousness from *knowledge*. It’s not because the philosophical zombie actually *thinks* it’s delicious, but because they know how to react. The end result is the same, but the difference is profound, don’t you think?”

“So, you think Yukari’s a philosophical zombie?”

Tenjou nodded happily. “Maybe not technically, but relatively speaking, yeah, I do. Don’t you agree? I mean, we can’t share whatever Mari experiences through those eyes of hers. If you just look at her, maybe she’s not a philosophical zombie. But from our perspective as people who can’t share her sense of redness or deliciousness, effectively—mutually—we’re pretty much philosophical zombies...oh, by the way, did you know Mari can’t tell the difference between humans and plastic models too?”

There were tears in Tenjou’s eyes. The tears dripped out quietly, but Tenjou didn’t seem to notice as she continued to speak. “Maybe that was a confusing way to put it. It’s true, she sees humans as robots, but she is able to distinguish between human ‘robots’ and model robots. But to her, the distinction isn’t between humans and models. It’s one of height and complexity and autonomy and that kind of stuff. That’s all it is to her. Sentient or insentient? Alive or dead? It means *nothing* to her! Mari doesn’t make the distinctions you and I take for granted—she’s not capable of them! To Mari, humans and appliances and plastic models are all the very same thing, just with different features and purposes and levels of sophistication! In her eyes, we’re equivalent to model robots!” Tenjou was raving wildly.

I fixed her a careful stare. “That’s how it looks to you, huh.”

“...Huh?”

“Couldn’t you look at it the other way?”

“What do you mean?”

Change your frame of reference, I grumbled to myself inwardly. What Tenjou was saying had already occurred to me. If you took it to its logical extreme, you could say that to Yukari, there was no big difference between humanity and plastic models. And because of that, I preferred to think that Tenjou had it backwards.

I took my eyes off Tenjou and redirected them toward Yukari’s house. There she was, gloved hands, happily working on her bike, whose name is Silver. She told me it was a gift to commemorate her starting elementary school, and she’d been playing with Silver ever since. She had both installed and removed the training wheels herself, raised the saddle as she grew, reinforced the frame, changed the tires and the chain—Yukari had made all kinds of modifications and was still using and taking good care of her faithful companion now that she was in junior high.

So yeah, the other way: it’s not that Yukari thinks of us as plastic models or appliances. It’s that she thinks of plastic models, appliances, bicycles, and stuff as human beings. That explains why she treats all of those things with such care. That explains why she looks so happy. It’s not that humans look like plastic models.

It’s that plastic models look like humans.

Is this an excuse? Maybe. But, you know, at the end of the day, even if the result is the same, I think the difference is truly profound.

I realized that Tenjou was in a trance as she stared at Yukari’s house, so I quietly pushed my bike away from her. “You do you, Tenjou,” I told her. “But just think about it.” I hopped on the seat.

Then I heard her voice behind me. “Hatou, you... If you’re going to stay with her, sooner or later you’re going to find out the truth. You’ll find out just how frightening, just how fundamentally different she really is. And then you’ll understand everything. I’m warning you, okay? You can take my words however you’d like.”

“Yeah. Thanks. See you later.” This time, I properly said my goodbye and rode off on my bike without looking back.

I parked my bike in front of the gate and went into the yard.

“Oh! Good morning, Gaku-chan! I didn’t expect you so early. Sorry, can you wait a minute? I’m almost done here.”

Yukari tried to get her siblings to bring me tea, but I told her not to worry about me and sat on the veranda. I watched her from behind as she lubricated Silver’s chain.

“Hey, Yukari?” I asked after a while.

“Hmm?”

“Which do you like more, me or that bike?”

“Wh-wha?! Wha, wha, wha?”

“Uh...never mind. It’s okay. Sorry. Forget I said anything.”

I hurried to wave my hand and gloss over the issue that was making her repeat her cry of panic like a broken record. I put my other hand on my thin, humble chest. *Oh, man. I think that cut me deep.*

But whatever. She’s known Silver since elementary school. How can I complain, right? Yeah, we’ve still got time...

I looked up to the part of the hill you couldn’t see from here. *Like hell I’m gonna let you win this*, I thought.

Saturday morning, three days later, journalists reported a new suspect in the Tokyo Ripper case had killed a detective and fled the scene of the crime.

Chapter 12: Marii's World

IT WOULD BE COOL if I could say I'd felt it in my bones, but honestly I didn't have any premonition of it or anything. My classmates seem to think I'm some old soul because I practice the *naginata*, and, okay, like yeah: I do pray at the altar every day like my grandma taught me, but all that said, I do not believe in the supernatural or a sixth sense whatsoever.

When I saw the news that the new suspect in the Tokyo Ripper case had fled, I immediately got the urge to run to Yukari, but it wasn't because of any ESP nonsense. It was just because I knew that Yukari was concerned about the case. She'd already been uneasy not being able to see how things were progressing, and I figured this news would shake her up as well. I imagined if I was there with her, I might be able to do something to support her, to reassure her.

I couldn't wait a second longer. It was a Saturday, so I could head to Yukari's house as soon as I wanted that morning.

If I were able to instinctively gaze into the future like a psychic, I probably wouldn't have responded to the ringing of the doorbell by thinking, *Is that Yukari? Did she get so scared she came here?*

I opened the door without a second thought.

Standing there outside was an older girl with a lovely smile. She was slender and had long hair. My heart raced. At first I assumed it was because she was so beautiful, but my heart was really telling me something really different. I had to take some deep breaths to calm myself and look over her carefully before I realized she was familiar.

She looked much more mature than she did in the photo—but it was definitely *her*. The older girl before me was one of the five people Yukari had pointed to that night after looking at the horrible photos.

Supposedly I'd undergone both physical and mental training to wield the *naginata*, but I couldn't move a finger. I couldn't even make a sound. I just watched, unable to resist, as she put something that looked like a stun gun to my stomach.

She smiled even more. “You don’t have to be so scared. I won’t kill you right away. After all, I need you as bait. What’s her name, Marii Yukari...? *I understand she has eyes like mine.*”

Those words finally got my body in gear. *Don’t mess with me!* I tried to jump her, but I lost consciousness in an instant.

When I came to, I was lying in what I thought was a factory. Maybe I wasn’t actually lying down; I wasn’t quite sure what state I was in. It was as if all my weight had suddenly disappeared. I couldn’t tell what my body was doing. I guessed I was lying down because what I saw looked like the vast ceiling of a factory, but I couldn’t quite make sense of what I was seeing—it was as if my brain was refusing to process everything. Was that even a ceiling above me?

My head felt all floaty, and my body felt super tingly. My stomach rumbled. It was weird.

I tried to turn my head to see what was around me, but my neck wouldn’t budge.

What exactly was tying me down? Wait, was I even tied down? I didn’t have any sense of it, and yet my head wouldn’t turn. I struggled to move my eyes and managed to get a person in my field of vision.

It was the girl who had stunned me.

The scene twisted like a nightmare as she sat on some kind of table and smirked down at me. But her odious face didn’t get my attention as much as what was in her hands. For some reason, she was holding a mannequin arm.

My vision felt clouded and strangely unreal, yet that arm had a bizarre kind of presence. I couldn’t look away from it if I tried. Somehow I seemed to recognize that arm.

It felt very familiar.

But why would I recognize a mannequin arm? I felt as if I’d seen it before, as if I knew it like the back of my hand. Why was that? Was it because the arm was just so realistic? I’d assumed it was a mannequin arm because it was *just* an arm, but when I looked carefully, it was

crimson around the elbow. It looked as if someone had recently cut it off with a blade—was it a movie prop or something?

I had a very bad feeling about this.

The girl smiled. “Oh, you’re awake? How lucky of you to wake up! Just so you know, you’d better not fall asleep again. I doused you with all I had of my special anesthetic, so I think if you go back to sleep, you’re probably not going to ever wake up again. Not that you’re going to live through this anyway, but I imagine you’d want to survive as long as you can!”

The girl licked the mannequin’s fingers in a way that looked kind of *sexual*. But I couldn’t look away, or even close my eyes. Her words were racing through my mind.

Anesthetic? Is that what this weird feeling is about? But I’m clearly awake—well, maybe not clearly—ahhhhhh, it’s like everything’s spinning—

“Oh, right, right, I’ll give this back to you.” The girl swung the arm toward me. As it approached, I finally realized that the “mannequin arm” was my left arm. It was holding my cell phone.

My cell phone? The one I just got...?

The phone fell out from my detached palm and disappeared from view. It should have landed on my chest, trajectory-wise, but I didn’t feel anything. I guess that was because of the anesthesia.

My cell phone. I wanted to cry. My parents just bought it for me for my birthday, and Yukari had made a bunch of modifications to it. There was only one of it in the world—it was one of a kind.

That’s right.

The first thing I should have done was use this cell phone to call Yukari. Her number was the first I ever saved to my contacts. If I’d only been more experienced with it, this wouldn’t—Yukari...?

I remember that the girl had mentioned her just before I passed out. I tried to yell. But my lips wouldn’t budge. A “special” anesthetic? What kind of anesthetic does all this?

Hey, why would she even use that? Aren’t there easier ways to restrain—

Then, she swerved to the side. What was she looking at? I couldn’t turn, so I made do with watching her expression.

She was staring at something. The girl curled her lips. “There you are,” she said. “What took you so long? I thought you’d abandoned this girl.”

A familiar voice called back: “Gaku-chan!”

Finally, I grasped the situation. Yukari had come. This suspect—no, this *murderer*—had called her here. And I was her hostage.

Things went dark. I tried to scream at Yukari to run, but my body didn’t respond, as if it wasn’t my own. No matter how hard I pushed, no matter how fiercely I wished—all that worked was my ears, telling me that Yukari’s footsteps were getting closer and closer, and I couldn’t do anything about it.

No, please, stay away, Yukari! Your eyes were right. She’s the actual Tokyo Ripper. She’s too dangerous...!!!

I heard someone gasp.

“How could you? Why would you do such a thing to Gaku-chan?”

“My, you...aren’t really what I pictured. Are you really Marii Yukari?”

“We talked through Gaku-chan’s phone. What is it you want to ask me? I’m here alone, just like I said. Why did you have to do something so horrible to Gaku-chan just to ask me a question?” Yukari sounded like she was on the verge of tears.

The girl sighed heavily as if let down by Yukari’s sobbing, and she flung the detached arm at me. (It looked like it landed somewhere around my hips, but I still didn’t feel anything.)

“I have a question for you first. You’re the one who spotted me, aren’t you? You’re Marii Yukari, the girl who sees humans as robots, right? You don’t have to hide it. That young detective told me what he knew in *painstaking* detail.”

That’s right, the news said she killed a detective and fled the scene.

Everything went silent. The girl put a sneakered foot somewhere around my shoulder.

“Uh-huh,” I heard Yukari say, willing herself to speak. “That’s me.”

The girl laughed shrilly. “So I was right, huh?! Then let me confess to you: I’m just like *you*.”

“Huh?”

“Though in my case, I see people not so much as robots but as bags of meat.” The girl prodded my shoulder with her toes—at least that’s what I assume, since I never felt it. “You see, humans are just tons of meat all clumped together. That’s how it’s been for as long as I can remember. Everyone says life is precious, but I can’t understand how to cherish life, no matter how hard I try. This kind of stuff doesn’t bother me a bit. See what I mean? We might see things differently, but you and I are one and the same, aren’t we?”

There was no response from Yukari.

“That’s why I wanted to ask you this, since you have the same eyes as me. I didn’t figure any normal person could give me an objective opinion. But you might be able to tell me honestly, without fear.”

“Tell you what...?”

“The *truth*.” The girl apparently stopped stepping on me and faced Yukari again. Her back loomed before me. “Marii Yukari. You see humans as robots. Is this correct?”



“Yes.”

“And actual robots also look like robots, correct? It’s not the case that robots look like humans?”

“Right. Robots are still robots.”

The girl breathed deeply, muttering to herself, “Good.” Then she asked her question. “Then tell me. In your eyes, is there a difference between robots who are actually humans and ordinary robots?”

“No.”

That one word stopped the conversation. Silence descended—only to be broken by a hysterical laugh. The girl jerked her body, as if the laughter were giving her a seizure. She was even teary-eyed.

After her cruel cackling filled the air for a while, she wiped away her amused tears and yelled, “Right! That’s right! That’s the truth!!! Thank you! That’s exactly what I wanted to know! See? My eyes were right. It was my eyes that saw the truth. Humans are just bags of meat—machines that just happen to be made of organic materials. Life isn’t precious at all! It’s just an illusion, a construct. There’s no soul.”

Yukari said nothing.

“Back in the old days, people believed that the earth was flat, that it rested on top of a turtle, and the oceans flowed into space. But that was just a fantasy born of ignorance. In the old days, people assumed that the heavenly bodies revolved around the earth. In reality, Earth is just another planet revolving around the sun. Way back then, people figured that we were created as humans from nothing. The truth is, people are just another species of monkey, yet people still think they have souls, that they’re *alive*. It’s yet another delusion to be destroyed one day, just like the geocentric theory. A fantasy concocted by humans desperate enough to believe they’re special. When actually, humans are merely a little more sophisticated than machines, operating with a low level of complexity. Humans are hallucinating that they’re alive. There are no such thing as souls or life. That’s the truth, plain and simple.”

Yukari still said nothing.

“So, see? I was right. There was nothing wrong with my eyes. Yes,

that's what I always wanted to know. Life, the soul—everyone said they were precious, so I always wondered whether these things I couldn't feel at all really existed. I wanted to know whether it was my eyes that were messed up or it was the world that was wrong. No matter who I chopped up and into how many pieces, I could never find the answer. But now, finally, you've given me the answer. *I* was right all along. Not everyone else. Not the world. Humans aren't precious. They're not special beings that have souls. They're objects that *operate* with a little more complexity than machines. Just mobile bags of meat—that's what humans really are. Life, souls—such things never existed."

"What makes you think that?"

Yukari's words held deep gravitas despite how quiet she was.

The girl crowed back triumphantly, "What makes me think that? It's obvious, isn't it? You said it yourself, Marii Yukari! There's no difference between robots made by humans and humans themselves!"

"So?"

The girl shrugged as if struggling to explain a simple thing to a hopeless child and opened her mouth—only to look around suspiciously, as if she'd heard something.

Yukari's voice boomed throughout the factory as she urged her to go on nonetheless. "That is what I said. There's no difference. But how do you get from Point A to Point B?"

"Because, see... Ugh, don't you get it? That's what it means, right? Robots aren't alive. They don't have souls. So if humans are the same, then that means that—"

"*Why do you think that?*"

This time, the sound was clear. *Rustle, rustle*. So light and dry. A big bug might make a sound like that running over a hard floor. For a second—in my dazed state of mind—I thought I was imagining things.

But the girl seemed to hear it too. She looked around again. She wasn't smiling anymore. Her body froze stiff. "What was...that?"

Yukari paused and answered unnaturally, “What was what?”

The girl was furious. “Don’t play dumb with me! I told you to come *alone*. Did you tell the—”

“Oh! No! I came alone, just like I said! But...well, it did feel a little tricky, but I was scared, so, you know, *alone* normally means not with other people... So anyway, as we were saying. How do you get from humans being like robots to the conclusion that they’re not alive? Why don’t you think robots have souls?”

“Th-that’s—obvious, isn’t—” The girl twitched and stepped back.

What was going on? What was happening?

Yukari’s voice sounded closer now. “This might be rude of me to say, but I don’t think your eyes are any different from normal people’s eyes. You just want to *think* you’re special, but in fact your eyes are normal. They’re not like mine at all.”

“Y-you have some nerve...!”

“I don’t know anything about life or souls. That’s beyond me. So I’m just answering the question you asked me: No. In my eyes, there’s no major difference between humans and robots. So—”

“What the hell is *that*?!” the girl shrieked, cutting off Yukari. She went on as if talking to herself, panic oozing from her voice. “*M-model robots*? No—how—that couldn’t—what the hell?! It’s some kind of trick, isn’t it? They’re remote-control or wind-up...”

Before we knew it, the rustling sound could be heard from every direction.

“*Stay away!*” the girl screamed. “K-keep those away from me! What the—*Stop them, now! Make them stop moving! Make them stop coming!!!*”

What in the world was happening? I did my best to look around. But I couldn’t check my surroundings when I could only move my eyeballs. All he could do was look and listen harder, and given that I’d been drugged, I’m not so sure the information I gained from that was processed correctly.

But okay—

The girl whipped her head at me. The expression on that face of hers I saw was unmistakably gripped by fear. Our eyes met. She swung

up her right arm. It turned out to have in it a saw or some kind of jagged cutting tool like that. The blade was already crimson for some reason. (Seeing that, a chill shot through my body.) It swung down at me as I lay helpless.

Just then, her right hand became empty. Something had knocked the saw out of it. She stumbled, righted herself, and ran. She immediately disappeared from my field of view, but the sound of her footsteps stopped right away. All I could hear was that dry rustling sound, growing, growing, filling the air. Thumping, thumping, coming from everywhere...

“Stop! Stay away! Please! Make them stop!” she pleaded.

“It’s okay. You don’t have to be so scared. It’s really okay, all right? They’re not going to treat you badly,” Yukari said.

“Th-this makes no—what—what—what is this? What are they? What the hell are they?”

“I don’t know how they look to you, but these are all my friends. So please, calm down, will you?”

“Your *friends*? What the hell? What do you—what are you—you —”

What in the world was happening? I moved my eyes desperately to get it in view. Then, something made it into the corner of my eye. A black shadow, drawing nearer. Something trying to peer into my face. For a second I thought the girl had come back, but the size was too different. It was as small as a gnome or fairy. I looked at it as hard as I could. There was something my brain was rejecting, but I wanted to see it anyway.

So I looked.

It reminded me of one of those models I’d seen at Yukari’s house, in the yard, on the fence, decorating everything. A 1/144-scale plastic model robot.

But it couldn’t have been a plastic model. The parts composing its body had too much life to be plastic, like the skin of a living thing. However I looked at it, it was alive. And anyway, if this was a plastic model robot, it wouldn’t peer into my face with concern and slap my cheeks. So if it wasn’t a plastic model—and it couldn’t have been something real...

Oh, I get it; that's how it is.

Some kind of shriek in the distance, I thought to myself vaguely: *This must be a hallucination. A drug-induced fantasy.* Her “special anesthetic” or whatever was clouding my consciousness. All these senseless things just looked like senseless things and this wasn’t reality

Yeah, that's what it was, a dream. So I had to hurry and wake up. I didn't know how long I'd been dreaming, but I had to wake up and save Yukari—

And with that, the world went black.

I'd been unconscious apparently, though I didn't know for how long. Seconds? Hours? I squinted and looked around. I still saw the same ceiling. But I didn't see a person near me anymore. I didn't see that little shadow either.

I heard Yukari's voice, coming from somewhere or other.

“Well, the song goes like: ‘His power is in your hand.’ What it’s saying is, it’s not the robot’s fault. It’s not your fault, either. The responsibility lies with the one holding the remote—in this case, I guess that would be the programmer—or maybe it’s just a bug?”

Then I heard the girl's voice, shouting. "Wh-what kind of nonsense are you spouting? I mean, what the actual hell? *Why don't I hurt? Why aren't I bleeding? How can I still talk?* W-wait, wait a second. What are you planning to do to me with those?"

“Calm down. There’s nothing to be scared of. With these I can fix that bug we found in you just like that. It’s okay. I mean haven’t done this before, but I’m pretty sure I can do it. So don’t worry. Don’t be afraid. It’s not going to hurt, okay?”

"Wha—*d-don't*, you nutjob! What makes you think that'll fit in there? D-don't—you—n-no—no don't no no no no no no no no no no no! No no no..."

“Just be quiet already, will you?”

The girl’s voice stopped abruptly, and my lights went out again.

When I opened my eyes once more, my head was in Yukari’s lap for some reason.

Meanwhile, Yukari had the mannequin arm in her hands, and she was moving her head around looking at it. “Oh! What do I do? It’s so far gone already. Oh, no. Oh, no! This is going to be useless now too...”

Then she caught my eyes looking at hers, and she opened hers wide, hid the mannequin arm behind her back for some reason, and smiled. “Oh! Oh! Um... It’s okay, Gaku-chan. You’ll be okay. I promise I’ll fix you right up. Yeah. I have done this once before, and this is going to be a lot simpler than with Ten-chan. So relax and take a nap for me, okay?”

Yukari’s hand stretched out and gently closed my eyelids, as if tenderly stroking them. I was immediately surrounded in darkness and couldn’t open my eyes again on my own.

Hey, didn’t that girl say I shouldn’t go back to sleep? I thought back to earlier. She said if I went back to sleep I wouldn’t wake up again because of the anesthetic. I tried to tell Yukari that, but I couldn’t will my eyes or mouth to move. I felt as if my head was being stroked. An intense sleepiness came over me that I just couldn’t resist.

My consciousness began to drift away again, sucked into that same dark. Just before I lost it, I thought I heard Yukari say something like, “Are you going to get mad at me like Ten-chan did? Are you going to hate me too? I hope you don’t, Gaku-chan. That would hurt... But I have to do this, Gaku-chan. Because you’re my precious friend.”

Maybe the girl was just bluffing, or maybe I was already dreaming at that point. In any case, I did wake up again. This time, I was in my bed at home. I looked at the clock and it was nighttime. According to

my family, I'd come home in the afternoon saying I felt bad and went straight to bed. I, myself, didn't have any memory of this.

My grandma said that a middle-aged man had visited while I was asleep. He said he was a detective. When he heard that I was asleep, he just left, after asking her to tell me not to worry because the Tokyo Ripper had turned themselves in. My grandma was confused about why he would come to tell me that, but I managed to gloss over it.

That left me sitting in my bed, looking at my left hand, while recalling that mannequin arm that still remained in my fuzzy memory. I made a fist. I opened it. Nothing felt off. There naturally wasn't any scar from a cut or trace of treatment.

In that case...I had to be overthinking this.

It must have been a dream.

Then I heard my cell phone ring.

Since I'd just received it recently, Yukari's number was the only one I had a ringtone for. (I'm actually not so good with gadgets, so it was Yukari herself who set the ringtone for me.) So I hesitantly—and I mean *really* hesitantly—answered the phone.

I was so relieved things were fine. And I was even more relieved when I heard Yukari's soothing voice the moment I picked up.

"Hello? Gaku-chan?"

"Uh-huh. Yukari... Yukari? Are you okay? You're not hurt or anything, are you?"

"Huh? Oh—oh—what are you talking about? I'm fine, of course, but—Gaku-chan, how about you? Are you okay? Like, um...don't read too much into this, but your left hand..."

"Oh, I feel totally fine."

Through the phone, I could hear her sighing with her entire body. It felt kind of funny to me. I thought she was smarter than me, but she was oblivious in some ways. Falteringly, she asked, "By the way, Gaku-chan...do you remember anything about today?"

"That's a good question, actually. Apparently I came home in the afternoon and was sleeping until now, but I don't remember anything. I

just have this feeling that I was having a wicked scary dream...”

“Really? Huh. Oh, yeah, that’s good!”

“It’s good? Were you listening to me, Yukari? I just said I can’t remember anything and I was having a nightmare!”

“Oh! Um, yeah, that’s true. Okay, Gaku-chan, you’d better get a good night’s sleep, then. Once you get some rest, those nightmares will disappear. You can probably wait until tomorrow to get your left hand checked. So, take care...”

She was trying to end the conversation, but I stopped her. I said casually, “Wait one second. Before you hang up...there’s one question I want to ask you.”

“Uh-huh?”

“I lost something—my cell phone. Do you know where it is?”

The other end of the line was quiet. After an awkward silence, she piped up, “Your cell phone? Uh, no. Wh-where could it be? I wonder—Oh! Oh! I wonder—”

As she went on in a panic, trying to smooth things over, I sighed dramatically. “Why don’t you admit it, Marii Yukari? I remember what happened. I know it’s late, but let’s meet up now anyway, okay? We ought to talk.”

Yukari eventually answered, “...Okay.”

“Cool. How ’bout in front of school?”

Once we wrapped up, I took a long look at my left hand which I had been holding to my ear all this time. The current time showed faintly through the skin of my palm, and then disappeared.

My arm looked normal again.

To my eyes, my arm looked perfectly, comprehensively normal. There was no sign that it had recently rung or shown the current time.

I changed my sweat-drenched shirt and went to the school grounds, finding Yukari already there.

“And then Ten-chan fell off the jungle gym.”

We were sitting by the closed gate of our school at night. Yukari was telling me her story, although she was mumbling and halting.

Back then, Yukari and Tenjou had been playing alone on a jungle gym that was about to be demolished. Tenjou's hand slipped, and she fell into the middle of the jungle gym. And the about-to-be-demolished jungle gym chose that moment to collapse completely—right onto Tenjou.

“Ten-chan's body was a mess. I could see that she was about to break beyond repair, so I did my best to put her back together then and there. It was my first time, but I told myself that I could do it. I psyched myself up as much as possible. ‘It's okay, I have what it takes,’ I said to myself. ‘It's no different from putting together a model. It's no different from fixing an appliance.’ So I put together the parts and replaced what was damaged...and, well, I fixed her.”

“Like how you used my cell phone to fix my hand?”

“Yeah. I used the jungle gym itself.”

“Right,” I sighed. I looked at my left hand. It had been pretty shocking to me already that I'd lost a hand and had it fixed (and not with bandages, but with a cell phone). How much must it have shaken Tenjou to have almost died and been “reassembled” with jungle gym parts? What kind of trauma would that leave on the mind of a little kid?

“So Tenjou...knows?”

“Yeah, she does. To be honest...I was so desperate to fix her, it didn't occur to me to put her to sleep first, so, um, Ten-chan was awake the whole time...”

“Yeah, okay, maybe I can't hold it against Tenjou then.” I mean, Yukari did save her, but under those conditions...

“And what about you?” A note of seriousness entered into Yukari's voice.

I turned and looked at her. “Huh?”

“What about you, Gaku-chan? It's my fault that happened to you, and you were frightened out of your wits... and your left hand, well, you know, and the other parts too—”

“O-other parts?!”

“Gaku-chan, do you hate me?”

Yukari's purple eyes stared at me. I still thought they were beautiful. I felt as if they were sucking me in, and honestly, I wouldn't even mind if they did...

I compulsively averted my gaze, and it landed back on my left arm. No scar, no seam—nothing that looked out of the ordinary at all.

But that was because I was looking at it with my eyes. It had to look different to Yukari.

To her, humans unavoidably looked like robots, and to me, humans unavoidably looked like well...humans. That's just how it was. The cell phone that had replaced the broken parts of my body was now a part of it, even if I couldn't perceive it. Just like how Yukari said she could see the class president's sensors, Shou-chan's Vernier thrusters, and Kasoku's drills, but I couldn't—in the same way, I couldn't perceive the cell phone she said she used to fix my left hand.

Yes—Tenjou was right. I didn't understand. It wasn't just that things looked differently to Yukari and me. The things that we looked at were completely different. I could only see a human arm linked organically, where Yukari saw parts. Joints, connections, armor; To Yukari, that wasn't just what it looked like, but what it was. She could do more than view a part. She could touch it and verify its function—and that was why she saw the world the way she did.

There was meaning to the form she saw, and she understood it.

It was thanks to her eyes that she could fix things. Everything could be repaired and reassembled in her care. The rest of us couldn't because we weren't like her. Even if we looked at the same apple, Yukari and I would be staring at something uniquely different.

I understand that. But even so, I can't picture what it would look like to Yukari. Likewise, she has no clue what it would look like to me. We're living in different worlds, unable to enter one another's. No matter what, I can't see what Yukari sees, and Yukari can't see what I see.

We're parallel lines that continue forever, never intersecting.

“Gaku-chan...”

Yukari's frail voice brought me back, and we stared at each other once again. Her purple eyes wavered with fear. I mentally apologized to her for abandoning her. “I don't know how I look in your eyes...but I do

know what my eyes see.”

“Huh...?”

“To me, you look like a *friend*.” Yukari’s breath caught in her throat.

I smiled. “Why are you surprised? It should be obvious. You told me I’m adaptable because of my multipurpose capabilities. So, no problem! I’m not gonna start hating you because of a little thing like this. It’s not even like you broke me. You *fixed* me, so I don’t see how I could complain. I bet even Tenjou knows how it is deep down and just can’t come to terms with it. To me, you’re a friend. So, even if I look like a robot or whatever to you, as long as I look like a friend to you, I think I’ll be very happy with that.”

“Gaku-chan...” Yukari embraced me in a fit of emotion.

Patting her head, I thought to myself. It was true, I couldn’t see what Yukari saw. But when you thought about it, it wasn’t just her. The same went for me and Tenjou, or my parents, or anyone who had the same eyes as me. That’s how humans are. Even with the same eyes, the red of an apple I see isn’t necessarily the same hue that another person sees. We’re fundamentally separate, but we can agree that the apple is red, because that is what we’ve learned. We have no way of proving that we experienced the same thing, but we can believe in it.

We’re like parallel lines: left to our own devices, we’ll go on forever and ever without ever intersecting. But that’s what leads us to reach out to each other and try to pull ourselves closer to one another. Otherwise there’d be no way of getting the parallel lines any closer. Left alone, we wouldn’t intersect—and that was why we must take the initiative to reach out, why we want to connect, why we each wanted the other to reach out.

Why we wanted to be closer.

While I was thinking such out-of-character thoughts, Yukari was holding me tight and breaking out in tears. I hugged her even harder than ever before.

Even if we don’t see the same things, we can have the same feelings.

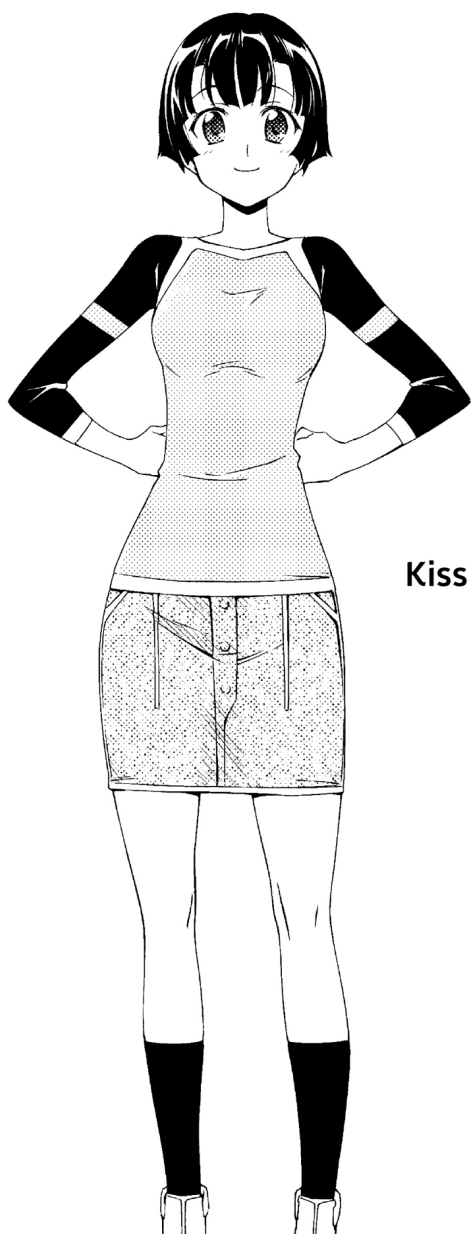
I hope at least some trace of these emotions gets through to you, I thought.

Conclusion: Who is Marii Yukari?

TO MARI YUKARI, all humans look like robots.

That is an essential part of her cognition that cannot be changed no matter what.

And I am still her friend.



Kiss Over One Billion



Introduction: About Beginnings

AS YOU MAY WELL KNOW, all stories have beginnings. You can't reach a story's ending without starting from the beginning. But where should I start in this story?

This is a story about something that happened to me, Hatou Manabu—or I guess you could say it's the story of my life? (Sorry to disappoint those of you who may have been expecting otherwise, but the main character of this story is definitely me and not my cute friend, Marii Yukari. She is a major character, but please accept my sincere condolences if you thought this story was centered on her.)

So, given that I'm the protagonist of this story, you should probably know at least something about me—so, should I start from when I was born? From when I was physically and mentally birthed into this world? Or maybe from when my essential essence was determined—

Come on now.

If I started from there, when would we get done?

Of course, if I wanted to, I could start from that point. I could even start from the day my father, who married into my mother's family, created me. (Then I'd have to start on a summer day, fifteen years before the present, in the afternoon—not at night—in the shade of the trees behind the dojo.)

If you preferred, I could even start from when they met, or when they were born, or even from their grandparents' ancestors. *Trust me. I could.*

I just don't want to.

I could keep going back further and further, so that's why I have to make a decision right here and now. I have to cut that thread of causality somewhere and pick a *beginning*.

So let's go back to the original question: where should the story begin? From when the situation that we're calling the story first arose?

Or from when we decided to tell it?

If we unravel the chain of events, we see that the situation arose from her death. It was all because she transferred from our school. That transfer was the result of a certain girl coming to study at our school.

By “she,” I mean Marii Yukari.

So, is that where I should start? Or perhaps I should start from that night when I got the phone call, after the blonde exchange student asked me that unavoidable question. The phone call was from someone I never would have imagined, and it marked the start of the things that happened.

Should I start there?

No. I know the day I want to start on.

Ha, here I am asking where I should start, but I’ve already decided. It may not have anything directly to do with the events, but I want to make the time when Yukari and I first met the start of everything. I think that’s crucial to me. I apologize for taking the long way here, but this is my story and I intend to tell it the way I want to. Anyway, it’s not that important of a story in the first place, and—see, this is the way I’m planning to wrap it up: “And it was all a dream. The end.”

So I’ll start this story the way I want.

It all began when I met Marii Yukari, a girl who said that all other living things looked like robots to her.

Or how about I make it more dramatic?

It all started with my first kiss.

Chapter 1: How I Met Yukari

YUKARI AND I met at the corner of a corridor between two buildings at our school, a little over halfway through the new term. To be precise, we'd seen each other before. In fact, we lived in the same neighborhood and had gone to the same elementary school. We were even in the same class when we started junior high. You could say we already knew each other. After all, I did know Marii Yukari's name and face from the first day of the term that year.

Her appearance is striking, so I remembered her. And hey, I'm not saying this just because I'm her friend either.

I wouldn't describe her as a *beauty*, per se, but if I were to call her a *pretty girl*—an expression which admittedly is embarrassing both for the person who says it and the person it's said about—I think the general consensus would be positive. Marii Yukari looked young, even discounting the fact she'd been in elementary school until recently, and the way she looked in the baggy uniform that was so obviously brand-new inescapably drew the eye. This resulted in me, for the first time, thinking of a human being as similar to a small animal.

I, meanwhile, was the least adorable fresh junior high school student you could imagine. I was rough and unfriendly and had tough feet and strong muscles from practicing the *naginata* ever since I was a kid. I'd never lost to a boy my age in arm wrestling, and I'd never thought of myself as cute.

If you ask why I hadn't approached Marii Yukari much despite having committed her name and face to memory from the first day we met, it might be because I was more self-conscious than I realized. I thought that there was no way a girly-girl like her and a tomboy like me could have anything in common.

Of course, I was like that to my other classmates too—not just Yukari. I kept my distance from everyone and never made an effort to be part of the class. I was socially awkward and my macho attitude just made it worse. From the start of the new term, I got a reputation as an aloof girl, reliable only in important situations, not that my standoffish

image lasted for long once I got to know Yukari.

There were always invisible lines between me and others. That was fine by me.

There were still enough kids I knew from elementary school that I wasn't *completely* antisocial. I was able to chat during breaks, and I was included in groups during lunch and gym class. That was enough for me as far as friends went.

It wasn't that I wasn't interested in other people or that I was disillusioned about friends. In fact, I'm actually more the type to get fired up in conversation, as you can see from how I'm talking to you right now. Still, I guess I was still a little kid at heart and didn't want other people to know.

But things were different now.

We were wearing uniforms, and my friends from elementary school seemed totally changed. They looked older than me too, and I wanted people to see me as mature. I wanted to act like an adult—like a grown woman—but I was a dull person with nothing to show off except my skills with a *naginata*. I figured the only way I could avoid letting the cat out of the bag was to shut up, and that was easier for me anyway. Rather than have people think that I couldn't do anything feminine at all, I preferred for them to think I just wasn't interested.

Pride exists to satisfy yourself and no one else; I kept my pride by playing the role other people assigned to me.

So you can see how Yukari's world and mine never would have intersected.

I was Hatou Manabu, the one who had no interest in cute things or being cute, yet that vibe was what caught Yukari's attention.

To put it bluntly—and this is going to sound like a joke—to Yukari, who had purple eyes with a special way of seeing the world, it was not clear at all whether I was a boy or a girl. So, in order to avoid offending me in the future, she decided to find out...by following me.

Let me point out here that I have swift reflexes as a result of my martial arts training, though maybe it's just my personality. I also walk twice as fast as other people. My friends get left in the dust when I'm out with them.

Meanwhile, Yukari is short; she's got a small gait. She might move

her legs fast, but her overall movements are small.

Therefore, her version of stalking consists of scampering around for a bit, hiding, looking around, and scampering around again to close the distance when the coast looks clear. That in itself is quite heartwarming if you ask me, but I'd like you to imagine this: what would happen when a girl like Marii Yukari comes hiding and scampering, hiding and scampering, hiding and scampering right as I turn the hallway corner?

I disappeared, and she dashed ahead in a panic to follow. At that moment, I remembered I forgot something and turned around.

It happened in a flash.

Just as I whipped around the corner, I realized someone was sprinting directly at me. Without thinking, I lowered my posture and braced myself. We made eye contact at point-blank range.

Yukari's purple eyes opened wide, but she couldn't stop. She ran right into me. But she must have been trying to avoid a head-on collision, because she twisted all strange as she ran into me. I responded reflexively to her dangerous-looking position by reaching out and grabbing her. It was a pretty rash move. I was left learning the hard way that the omnipresent saying "No running in the halls" at schools was actually a pretty reasonable rule. Even a body like Yukari's—light as a feather—could be a lethal weapon with a running start. I realized there was no way I was going to be able to take the full-throttle momentum of Yukari, so I guess I lowered my center of gravity and tried to break my fall while also protecting Yukari. She ended up on top of me as my back smacked against the floor, as if she'd pushed me down to the ground.

And I don't know what gods' sense of humor was responsible for this, but our lips were locked tight.



How much time passed with us like that? Probably not that much in reality, but it felt like an eternity. Neither of us breathed until our lips separated. One of my hands was on Yukari's butt, while the other had slapped the floor the way they teach you in martial arts. My mind was spinning. My heartbeat was raging out of control, yet I still had the presence to be amused by the situation. I forgot to breathe, yet I still was careful to take note of Yukari's comfortable weight and the heat that came to me through her uniform. It didn't even occur to me what an unpresentable state I was in, held down and kissed by another girl in the middle of the school hall.

We were the only ones in the world, as if time had frozen, and I was waiting for it to start again.

I took another good look into Yukari's eyes.

What a pretty purple, I thought.

I wonder how long that lasted. I guess what set things back in motion was that my tongue got curious about how dry or moist my lips were and came out to lick them—along with Yukari's, which were in close contact. Yukari's upper body instantly shot up. I groaned as her full weight fell on my stomach, and hearing that, Yukari hurried up and got off.

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" she started. "Oh! Oh! Oh...! That wasn't my intention! Um, I'm sorry! Hatou-san, I, um, didn't think...you'd turn around, so..."

"Wait. Do you mean we didn't run into each other by coincidence, but you were *following* me?"

"Oh! Um, no, it's not as if I had something... Well, I did, but I was planning to take care of it myself, not to ask you, you know, to be discreet. I just wanted to check in advance whether you were a boy or a girl, so—"

"Are you saying I don't look like a girl? You thought I was a boy wearing a skirt? And that's why you came and kissed me?!"

"Oh! No! I'm not saying you don't look like a girl. I just—wanted to check... So, I mean, you are a girl, right? Oh! No! I mean—um—I didn't kiss you on purpose—um—I'm sorry—I, um—Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh!"

I already knew she didn't do it on purpose. I was just trying to tease her, but Yukari ended up crying. It was in my rush to console her that I found out about her eyes—about how, to the purple eyes of Marii Yukari, all living things other than her looked like robots.

So, I looked like a robot to her, and with that along with my name being Manabu (and probably because of my vibe, though she was evasive about that), she wasn't sure if I was really a girl or not.

Of course, I didn't believe her right off the bat. I mean, it was pretty out there, and after all, anyone can make up some subjective stuff about how things look to them. So I just figured Marii Yukari was one of those cringey, edgy weirdos who say they're aliens or that they can see fairies or stuff like that. I said whatever seemed appropriate, swore to keep the events of the day between us, and wrapped it up like that.

However, I kept what she said in mind and watched her. Then I saw that she did act oddly in many facets of her life in ways that suggested people really did look like robots to her—and she was doing her best to hide it. If Yukari really was just trying to be special, why would she try to hide it? If you looked at “eclectic” celebrities, they had to know they were weirdos, but they didn't try to hide it. (If they hid it, then we wouldn't be calling them weirdos, now would we?) Meanwhile, Yukari was doing her darndest to hide her odd behavior and seem as forgettable as possible.

She was desperate to be normal.

Once she explained herself, I got a better understanding of who she was. So, when I spotted Yukari trying to paper over her eccentricity and then getting herself in even more of a jam, whether or not I believed her, I had to help her. Every time she got in trouble—like in art class or swimming lessons—I was compelled to go to her rescue. We spent more and more time together. Yukari started to rely on me more, probably because she had revealed her secret to me. Before long, we were close.

So that's how we met.

I did ask Yukari afterward what our shocking first meeting was like for her—you know, what it was like kissing me. She said she was too shocked to think or feel anything. I don't think she was being shy. That was probably the truth for her.

Honestly, even if it was my first kiss, the actual act of kissing her left zero impression on me. I don't even remember what Yukari's lips felt like. Were they soft like people say? What I remember is not the feeling of her lips, but that heat and weight of Yukari as I held her and that sense of being in a world that only included us.

So, that's how Yukari and I met. I think that's where my story began.

Chapter 2:

Tenjou Nanami and Schrödinger's Cat

BY THE WAY, have you heard of qualia? They're the sensations that arise in your head, like red's feeling of redness, the way the color blue seems particularly blue to you, or seeing something purple and knowing it's a hundred percent purple. The same colors might be perceived differently by different people or in different situations. That kind of feeling is called qualia, as I understand it.

Of course, we're not just talking about visual stuff like colors. Sound, touch, smell—all the subjective experiences produced by our senses. All of those impressions involve qualia.

There are qualia of pain, for example. We know that when we get injured, it hurts. We understand that pain plays a role as a kind of danger signal to protect us, and that's why there are various kinds of pain, yet we don't know why pain feels the way it does. If a part of your body feels hot or cold, uncomfortable or achy, those sensations are qualia of pain. If those qualia make you sad or angry or even happy, those are also qualia you're feeling. It's not only fleeting things, either. If you see a movie that makes you happy or upset for the rest of the day, or even a movie lights your heart aflame with martial spirit or calms you in a pleasant afterglow, those lingering feelings are also qualia.

The one who told me all this and taught me the concept of qualia was one of the few others who knew Yukari's secret; she was the one other person who had experienced it firsthand. She was the ace student in the classroom next door, Tenjou Nanami.

Nanami and Yukari went way back—all the way to kindergarten. Yukari didn't know how to smile then. What's more, she didn't consciously express herself at all. After all, humans looked like robots to her. Robots don't typically look overjoyed or dejected. At the very least, they don't have the kind of rich and flexible expressions that humans do. Yukari's way of seeing the world meant she had never seen a human expression, and just like how she couldn't tell whether I was a boy or a girl, she really had no idea about the subtle differences that corresponded to people's feelings. She wasn't even aware of the concept

of facial expressions.

Do dogs and cats have feelings? Do they show them? If you have a pet, I'm pretty sure you'll fire back at me that they, of course, have feelings. And if you've been with your pet for a long time, you might even be able to read their expressions. After living with a pet and investing vast amounts of time and love in it, you might be able to read its subtle expressions, with no need for baring of fangs, cautious growls, or tail wagging.

But to any human other than its owner, the subtle body language of an unfamiliar dog or cat are pretty much indistinguishable. In that same way, Yukari can't read people's expressions.

If she's known someone for a long time, Yukari might somehow be able to guess how they're feeling, like you would with a dog or a cat, but for strangers and acquaintances, she has trouble judging whether they're amused, angry, happy or sad. That's the world that purple-eyed Marii Yukari lives in, and for that reason, friends are very important to her. Tenjou Nanami was not only the first friend she ever made, but also the one who taught her how to smile.

Yukari might not have known how to show them back then, but of course she has feelings. It's just a matter of being able to *express* them.

Nanami was able to understand that, even as a child. She tried everything she could think of to teach Yukari how to smile. She pinched Yukari's hand with no warning and told her that the face she was making was one of sadness. She stole her lunch and told her this was an expression of anger. She punched her out of nowhere to make her express surprise, tickled her and fed her candy, watched movies with her, and looked at animals with her. Whenever an emotion appeared on Yukari's face, Nanami would draw it or show her a mirror, and she'd say, "This face you're making without trying to is an expression. This is the best way to show other people how you feel."

So, with Nanami's dedicated coaching, Yukari finally learned to communicate using more than just her words. She became able to express her feelings so richly, so honestly, and so openly it would make me embarrassed to watch her. I hate to say it, but I give credit where credit is due—Nanami is amazing for that.

Nanami was Yukari's best friend until the accident. Afterward, Nanami hated Yukari and treated her with contempt. She'd keep her distance, pick on her, or provoke her. But even so, no matter how mean

Nanami was to her, Yukari called Nanami her friend and tried to be close to her.

Of course, it could be that Yukari's eyes—her vivid purple eyes that couldn't distinguish expressions but could read vibes very well—saw through Nanami's complicated feelings, based on her long experience with her. But I think that even if it was the case that Nanami hated Yukari from her heart—and I think she really did in some ways—still Yukari wouldn't have wanted to give up on being friends with Nanami, who taught her how to smile.

Tenjou Nanami taught me the word *qualia*.

She taught me a lot of other difficult concepts, like about philosophical zombies and inverted qualia too. Of course, at the time we'd just entered junior high, and Nanami was probably paraphrasing what she read in books or on the internet, so I can't say much about whether we really knew what we were talking about.

To give one example, at one point, Nanami called qualia "emergent," and at another point, she said that qualia were not things that "emerged." So I asked her if she hadn't contradicted herself, and she snapped back shamelessly, "There's nothing odd about that! Science is progressing in leaps and bounds!" But I didn't know what *emergent* meant in the first place.

Whether or not we knew what we were talking about, Nanami was sincere in her desire to learn more about this stuff, and I was interested too. So, kids that we were, we talked about it to the best of our abilities.

Nanami explained qualia like this: "I think, when you get down to it, qualia are like 'A picture is worth a thousand words.'"

"You mean, like, the saying?"

"That's right. In other words, no matter how much you know about the color red, you'll never understand it until you see it for yourself. Conversely, if someone's never actually experienced the color red for themselves, no matter how much of an expert they might be on it otherwise, you couldn't say they really know what 'red' is. You see

what I'm saying? Hundreds of words won't get you to true knowledge, but one look will. That one look is qualia, I think. Not that I'm really sure what that one look consists of..."

Whether or not we understood them, we talked about these matters with all the seriousness we had. We were compelled.

At one point, we talked about quanta and Schrödinger's cat.

"You know quanta?"

"Like electrons and molecules... The minimum unit of stuff, right?"

"Right. Humans and stars and everything in the universe are made of materials called quanta. And quanta are particles, but they also have the properties of waves. You follow me? What I'm saying is they're simultaneously matter with form and energy without form. Because they're waves, they're not definite objects, but probabilities. They're expressed by concentrations of probabilities. That's what quanta are."

"Concentrations of probabilities?"

"Right, like, is the probability there high or low? You see, it isn't 'determined' whether quanta are there or not until you measure them. It's not that you can't know they're present, it's just that it's really indeterminate. It's when you measure them that for the first time their existence is 'determined.' So until you measure them, you have to consider them in terms of high or low probabilities of being there. Those are the properties of quanta. It might sound strange, but this isn't science fiction. This is what scientists think reality is. 'You don't know until you see it'—our bodies are made of that, multiplied by a very large number."

"Huh." That was all the reaction I managed, largely because I had a hard time wrapping my head around it, honestly.

But that didn't slow down Nanami. "So, Hatou, do you know of the thought experiment they call 'Schrödinger's cat'?"

"Uh...that kind of rings a bell, I think..."

"To put it simply, you prepare a box that releases a lethal gas when a switch is pressed, and you place a cat in it. Then what happens to the cat?"

I didn't see where Nanami was going with this. I hesitated and then answered, "The cat's alive until someone flips the switch, and then

it's dead, right?"

"Right. Normally that would be the case. But in our thought experiment, the one flipping the switch is not *someone*, but a *quantum*. So our device is one in which, if the quantum is there, the switch is flipped, and if it's not, the switch remains untouched. But here's the thing: quanta are probabilistic and not determined until they are *observed*. That means that the switch state determined by the quantum is also probabilistic until it's observed. Until you open the box and look inside, the switch exists simultaneously in an on and an off state, which means that the cat whose life is determined by the state of the switch also exists simultaneously in a probability of being alive and a probability of being dead until you open the box. Do you see what I'm getting at?"

"Um..."

"Here's what this experiment tells us. People think quanta have strange properties at the micro level, but it doesn't apply to the macro world—that is, the real world. But they're wrong! Just as a quantum determines the state of this switch and the state of the switch determines whether the cat is alive or dead, it only makes sense for these properties to apply to the macro world as well. If that's really how quanta are, it only makes sense that we should be like them, existing simultaneously alive and dead until we're observed. That's the point of Schrödinger's cat."

Once that sunk in, I yelped in surprise. "What?! But here we are! We *exist*! We're not probabilities. We're obviously here. We're not about to disappear whether or not someone sees us."

"Are you sure?"

"Uh... What do you..."

"Well, you raise a good point. That was the conclusion of Schrödinger, who invented this thought experiment. He argued that since there obviously couldn't be a cat that was both alive and dead, it followed that quanta couldn't simultaneously be present and absent. But the physicists, like, at Copenhagen disagreed. They said that given that quanta are probabilistic, the only problem with having a cat alive and dead was your inability to realize the thought experiment itself. They said if you could eliminate all the systemic obstructions, the external factors like heat and fluctuation, if you could just perform the experiment properly, then sure, you could have your alive-and-dead cat.

And now that's the dominant view. Apparently, Schrödinger quit physics toward the end of his life over it. Well, that's just what I've heard, but it would be pretty funny if that was true, wouldn't it? That the one who established the Schrödinger equation, the foundation of quantum mechanics, would have been unable to accept it!" Nanami was getting a wild smirk and was about to continue rambling until I interrupted her.

"Wait. Are you saying we actually are probabilistic? Like without those 'external factors' or whatever, we'd stop being clearly alive or dead the moment someone took their eyes off us?"

Nanami shrugged. "Good question."

"What do you mean, good question?"

"We just don't know. All that we know is that quanta behave probabilistically. We don't know why they behave that way, what process they undergo, or why it's only on the micro level. There's still no complete answer. Honestly, we don't know what it means for the state of a quantum to be determined—wave function collapse, they call it—we don't know what 'observation' is," Nanami continued.

"In the case of Schrödinger's cat, at what point is the cat observed? When a person opens the lid and sees it? When the sight reaches their brain? Or when the cat feels something? Or what if the person who opened the lid of the box was in a bigger box? And what if there was another person outside that box? If the person and the box were in a big box and there was a person observing it, when would it be determined whether the cat was alive or dead? Would it remain indeterminate until the last person 'opened the box'? We know that on the micro level, quanta exist in a bizarre state of being both waves and particles. We've confirmed that molecules, which are combinations of quanta, exhibit quantum behavior. We might even be able to identify it in viruses. Then why can't we spot it in the macro world? If it's true that presence is determined by observation, if there really is such a thing as wave function collapse, then when does it happen, and at what stage? Why? How? There are various interpretations, but we don't really know. All we have are the results. And some say we'll never know the process, no matter how far science advances."

In the old days, scientists thought that scientific progress would solve all the world's mysteries, but modern science says that's not the case. Why? Because in the micro world, just measuring something

changes its state. And such little changes could exert big, complex changes on reality. There's a limit to what we can know, and no matter how far science advances, we'll never have 100 percent accurate weather forecasts, apparently—at least under the current scientific system.

“Anyway,” Nanami went on, “sorry for the long lecture, but see, the point I'm trying to make is, this world isn't as certain as we think it is. Here's another theory, for example: quanta aren't probabilistic and presence isn't determined at the moment of observation. Instead, the universe is composed of an inconceivable number of parallel worlds that interfere with each other at the micro level to cause quanta to behave in strange ways that appear probabilistic.”

“Parallel worlds?”

“That's right, parallel worlds! Worlds that are almost the same as ours, only just a little bit different. Quanta behave in strange ways because of interference with their counterparts in parallel worlds, and when the interference ends, they're 'determined.' So according to this view, it is predetermined whether the cat in the box is alive or dead. It's just that there are innumerable worlds in which it's alive and innumerable worlds in which it's dead. You exist separately in each of these worlds, and they're all interfering with each other, but you can only perceive your own world. Can you buy that? Parallel worlds? It sounds like science fiction, but they're actually seriously researching this!” she rattled off excitedly. “The wave function collapse model is called the Copenhagen interpretation, and the parallel world model is called the Many-worlds interpretation, or MWI. The many-worlds interpretation is being used as a foundation for quantum computers or something. They're both being explored as possibilities that may or may not be true but are plausible. It's not science fiction. This is *actually* the world we live in.”

If you're laughing right now at the fact that we were some silly junior high schoolers talking about this kind of stuff as if we had any idea about it, may I kindly suggest that you go take a flying leap? Then, come back to life: have someone replace half your body with parts of a broken jungle gym and fix your damaged hand with the components of a cellular phone!

Then you might have a single clue as to how we felt.

“So, this might be kind of a leap, but I think the power of Mari's

eyes might have to do with that, you know? We look like robots to her, right? So if we use the Copenhagen interpretation, it might be that what she observes undergoes wave function collapse to be robots.

Alternatively, if we use the Many-worlds interpretation, it could be that her eyes are looking at us in another world where we are robots. Or, when you think about it, in the first place—maybe it's not that qualia are generated from what we *see*, but that they're just the determination of the form that what we see ought to have."

"That's...quite a leap, all right."

"Yeah, I admit it, but what do you expect? I'm a teenager, not a scientist. But don't you think it sounds plausible? We can't confirm it with our own eyes, but then we can't see quanta either. So maybe what Mari sees undergoes some sort of change on the micro level or something. Our bodies actually change that way, regardless of what they're actually made of! With my qualia, I observe my body as flesh and blood, so my body is determined as human, and your left hand looks like a left hand and not a cell phone because you're the one observing it, you know? Anyway, when you think about it that way, it could be that there's nothing unnatural at all about Mari's power. It could be we just don't know much about it and, in fact, it's not bizarre; it's normal."

In the past, Tenjou Nanami had an accident that almost killed her, and Yukari saved her; rather, Yukari fixed her using pieces of a broken jungle gym. According to Yukari, almost 40 percent of Tenjou Nanami's body was repaired with metal bars, and they weren't the usual materials that compose a human being, but jungle gym parts. I guess it was no wonder that Nanami, who was only a child then, ended up fearing and hating Yukari.

Nanami and I, in general, did not get along. When Yukari was between us, we argued obstinately all the time. But we did talk normally sometimes, like when it was just us and Yukari wasn't around. When a nice breeze was blowing, and you looked up and the sky above was clear, and you were able to savor a moment of calm...at times like those, Nanami would seem to forget that I was her bitter rival and start going on about what she'd learned about science and letting her feelings out into the open. Sometimes, she said, she was still woken up by nightmares. Sometimes she'd look in the mirror and hallucinate that she wasn't human. She'd worry that in the next moment, the metal beams in her body would rust and crumble and her true robotic self would be

revealed.

The truth was that Nanami loved Yukari and valued her as a friend. She knew that Yukari saved her with the best of intentions. But to accept Yukari as she was would mean to accept herself as being almost half-made of jungle gym parts—otherwise she wouldn't be alive right now. If Nanami truly believed that, could she really call herself human, or even the same person she was before? It would take more than a few words to express Nanami's feelings for herself and Yukari, but Nanami was doing her best to accept this reality. Studying stuff like qualia and quantum mechanics—really, anything that seemed the least bit relevant, even if she was only a junior high schooler—was her way of trying to come to terms with it. Oh, and not to brag or anything, but I think I played a pretty major role too.

There was an incident in which I got attacked and dismembered by a serial killer. (Now that I think about it, that's pretty messed up.) Yukari fixed me. There was no jungle gym involved, but I guess it's still fair to say I was like Nanami. We'd both been through insane stuff and come out of it with "aftermarket parts"—in my case, my left hand had been fixed with an entire cell phone, and in Nanami's case, she'd been repaired with the bulk of a jungle gym. Thus, as those with similar circumstances, we were able to share with each other what was in our hearts, though I wasn't really as traumatized by it all as Nanami was.

Our connection went through Yukari, but at the same time, Nanami was starting to repair her relationship with Yukari by going through me. When I showed Nanami that I accepted myself the way Yukari fixed me, Nanami learned to accept what had happened to her. With a little more time, Nanami would probably have gotten over what happened in the past. She would have been friends with Yukari once again, getting along just like they used to.

If only Yukari hadn't left, that is.

Yukari moved abroad the next school year, and after that, Nanami and I didn't talk anymore. We were in the same class that year, but maybe out of a sense of guilt somewhere in our hearts, we avoided and ignored each other outright. The relationship between Nanami and me ended as if in synchronization with Yukari's departure.

There was actually a world where Nanami and I met at a reunion after we grew up. That was eleven years after the present, when we were twenty-five years old. In this world, believe it or not, Nanami was

an up-and-coming star actress while I was a freelance writer. So I never expected to see her in person, but she came to the reunion, and she greeted me all friendly. “Remember me?” she said.

I skipped the afterparty and asked Nanami if she wanted to come to my house. She said she had work in the morning (“Tenjou Nanamy” was her stage name, by the way), but she spent the night anyway.

Yukari and I had often slept at each other’s houses, but it was the first time Nanami had slept at mine. In the dark, lying beside each other, we talked about all sorts of things, as if to fill in all the time we hadn’t met. We started from recent events and gradually worked our way back to junior high.

“Hey, Tenjou, didn’t you date Kasoku in our third year?”

“Oh, no, you knew about that? I thought I kept it a secret from everyone!”

“Well, no, I’d say it was pretty obvious. Oops! Did I get in your way tonight then? You must have wanted to see him after all this time, huh? He was there, you know.”

Incidentally, I once dated Kasoku as well, at *exactly the same time* that Nanami did. It wasn’t cheating, of course. It was one-on-one and serious—as serious as you could be at that age.

“Well, I don’t know, how should I put it...” Nanami deflected bashfully.

Seeing my chance, I posed the question. “By the way, Tenjou...do you remember Marii-san?”

Nanami acted like she was thinking for a little bit, and then nodded. “Oh, yeah! I remember her, now that you mention it. Wow, Marii Yukari! She was a funny girl, huh? And she was so cute too...”

Hearing Nanami’s innocent prattle, it dawned on me: Nanami had forgotten Yukari, the girl she once called Mari. She’d written her off as someone in the distant past and forged her memories of her. That’s right: people alter their memories so easily. They remake the past, however it is convenient for them, all to protect themselves.

One could say that Nanami had re-observed the past. She’d reconstituted it as something she could accept by turning Yukari’s eyes and the repair by jungle gym into the jokes of a funny girl and not the truth. I was a little shocked but not really angry. I didn’t have the right

to be, anyway. I was the last person who could criticize Nanami for turning her eyes from reality and remaking the past the way she wanted.

Then Nanami dropped casually, “Oh, yeah, she didn’t come, did she? Marii-san, I mean. That’s right... She moved away at the end of our second year, didn’t she? I wonder what she’s doing now.”

All I could reply was an empty “Yeah.”

“Hatou, we barely hung out once we ended up in the same class, did we? It’s funny how we didn’t talk back then, but now, here we are, talking the night away.”

“Yeah. No kidding...”

I agreed with her. We could have been close back then. If only Yukari hadn’t moved away.

If only Yukari had lived.

I wasn’t angry at Nanami for conveniently forgetting Yukari. I wasn’t jealous, either. I wasn’t remorseful. If anything, I was *relieved*.

That was fine, I thought. *She was probably happier that way*.

Nanami left early in the morning. Just before she left, she seemed to hesitate and then said, “You know, Hatou...would you mind if we kept in touch a little bit from now on? Like this, you know...”

“Sure. Of course.”

“Really? I’m so glad! The truth is, I don’t have anyone else I can talk to like this.”

In junior high school, I never would have imagined Nanami looking so sincere. I couldn’t help but chuckle to myself. “What *are* you talking about, you superstar, you? Sure, let’s keep in touch. Call me anytime. I mean...we’re friends, aren’t we?”

That’s right, friends—from back in the day through Yukari, but still. *Call me anytime, okay?*

But I am not going to forget Marii Yukari—not ever.

That’s why I have no need for this world.

I guess I got ahead of myself telling this story.

I’d better keep this in order to avoid unnecessary confusion. One

year after I met Yukari, on summer vacation during my second year of junior high, I crossed paths with a criminal, suffered for it, and Yukari saved me (well, *fixed* me). Then I demonstrated my “multipurpose adaptability” as described by Yukari by taking it all in stride. I got closer to Yukari (and Nanami for good measure)—or so I thought.

Things changed after summer vacation. Nothing would be the same after the second term’s first day.

An exchange student had joined our class. She was like a little girl straight out of a storybook, with blonde hair and amber eyes, who called herself Alice Foyle.

And Alice, too, knew how things looked to Yukari.

Oh, yeah, there’s one other thing I forgot.

You know who taught me about the mysterious properties of light? That was Tenjou Nanami, too.

Chapter 3:

Alice Foyle and Jaunt

ALICE FOYLE was a genius.

She wasn't just smart, though she was pretty brilliant. When Alice got up to the podium, her long blonde hair flowing down to her hips behind her, everyone must have been thinking, *What's an elementary school kid doing here?* And as luck would have it, she actually *was* a kid. Eleven years old, and yet she'd already graduated from college—an Ivy League college, *concurrently*.

That said, what was really amazing about Alice Foyle wasn't simple smarts. Her true talent lay in her *viewpoint* towards math. She said that equations looked like pictures to her. Unfortunately, it was in a form that made no sense to other people, though she was able to represent everything from simple addition to difficult stuff like the wave equation in pictures and calculate results intuitively. (If you don't know what this means, please rest assured that I don't either. Even famous physicists probably wouldn't get it. Just think of it like this: Alice can figure out equations by drawing pictures.)

Apparently this ability of hers would show its true value in something called quantum computing. She advised, "If we can just develop a quantum computer, I'll be able to solve the P versus NP problem for you!" (As usual, I had no idea what she meant, but the confident way she said it made it sound pretty amazing.)

Alice furthermore was being counted on to make progress toward a theory of everything from an utterly novel approach. A theory of everything, otherwise known as a Grand Unified Theory (or GUT), makes it possible to represent all the forces of the natural world in a consistent system. It is a dream and an ambition of scientists hoping to explain the strange behavior of quanta and to solve the mysteries of the birth of the universe. So given that people thought she might play a role in this, you can see what a genius she was.

Alice was not (currently) a scientist. In fact, she wasn't even studying physics. Simply put, the way she saw the world meant she could manage equations intuitively. She didn't calculate. She inferred.

She literally drew pictures to find the right answer or to derive a formula. That was completely outside the range of possibility for normal people and had the potential to create a paradigm shift in the world of math and change the world. That was what made her a genius.

And it reminded me of a certain someone.

The teacher called on Alice, and she walked before the podium. She spoke smoothly, with a sparkling smile. “Greetings, Japan. I am Alice Foyle. I might not be here very long, but it is a pleasure to meet you all. Especially you, Marii Yukari-san. I have been rather eager to meet you.”

Alice Foyle’s purpose in coming to Japan was to scout Yukari for the organization she belonged to—Jaunt.

Alice was adorable from a distance, in the same way that the sharp thorns of a rose won’t prick you if you don’t get too close. Maybe I’m saying this because she was a different ethnicity, but looking at her made me think a terrifying beauty was about to emerge from within. This little kid was always standing up straight like someone was going to bite her. That was simultaneously cute and actually kind of imposing. However, she relaxed only around Yukari.

When Alice was talking to Yukari, she showed the innocence of her age, and it was so charming I’d catch myself staring. Alice spent as much time as she could stuck to Yukari. The sight of the two of them huddled together, as if arm in arm, was immensely relaxing to everyone. Seeing from behind Alice’s long blonde hair strewn across her back and Yukari’s neat, long hair next to it, anyone would feel as if they were looking at some fluffy animals—anyone including Nanami and me, who knew Alice’s true nature—and sigh in rapture. There was no way around it. Yukari loved hugs, so she didn’t seem to mind. The two of them, with their light and dark hair swaying this way and that, formed a much better symbol of world peace than freaking doves (and the way you couldn’t tell what was inside from the external appearance was another factor).

In front of our other classmates, Alice would always play the part of the model student from a foreign country, of a little kid doing her best in an unfamiliar land. In front of Yukari—and in front of Nanami and me, who were always with her (and in front of Kasoku Tomonori, a boy who Nanami often picked fights with, but he’s not important, so we won’t get into that)—she showed her true colors.

As soon as no one else was around, Alice first said to me, “For your information, I do not intend to play at being friends with nobodies like *you*. They say if you mix with red, you too will become red in turn. The one with whom I want to be friends is Yukari, my fellow genius.”

“Yukari’s...a genius?”

“Yes. Yukari is a genius. Yukari is the true genius. I suppose that nobodies such as you, who cannot accept those who are different from themselves, would not understand. For that reason, Yukari, you should have confidence. You are the one who is worthy. The stupid people who cannot accept you are the ones who should be ashamed to be alive.”

Alice said she always spoke so formally because Japanese was hard (though she made the occasional grammar mistake). Actually, I think she was deliberately looking down upon us. It got hella harsh when our classmates weren’t around.

“*Nobodies* is a pretty rude word to use,” I argued. “You’re the one who’s closing us off, aren’t you? Maybe you’re a genius or whatever, but we’ve been getting along just fine as friends. I mean, it’s not just us. Everyone in this class—”

“Are you certain about that, Hatou? Perhaps you are the only one who believes that. So, Hatou may argue that point, but what do you think, Tenjou?”

“Me? I—don’t lump me in with Hatou! Like, how dare you even suggest I could be friends with her? Even Mari’s my enemy! With those crazy eyes of hers...”

“Look, just shut up, Tenjou,” I said.

Yukari groaned. “Ngh, Ten-chan...”

Leaving aside that stubborn Nanami... Alice called people without talents—ordinary people like us—nobodies, despised them, and didn’t hide her contempt at all. It would be fair to say she flat-out hated us. This made Alice really a stereotypical stuck-up genius. She brilliantly embodied the stereotype of a kid genius, a child who’s far surpassed adults and sticks out like a sore thumb as a result, and was even subject to persecution as a foreign object.

Alice never tried to tell us about it, but her attitude made it painfully easy to imagine that she had been through some hard stuff.

After all, she was still young enough to be in elementary school. The more she demonstrated her disdain for ordinary people, the more it struck home that she was still just a child.

This might be too cynical of me, but I think that's why Jaunt sent her—because she was a child. Her purpose was to inspire the imagination of Yukari, who was the same type of genius, and make her see a certain future for herself that was convenient for Jaunt.

Alice, in any case, saw Jaunt as her true guardian.

“Yukari. Jaunt is an organization created to protect and nurture special children such as you and me. It has a school, although there are not many people in it. Do you understand, Yukari? I am about to tell you something important. There are other children like us. Children like you who are not known, who are hidden from view. You and I are the lucky ones. We are even more lucky to have met. Most who are like us, almost all of them, just disappear with no opportunity. They have no choice. They must have existed before also. They were only not known. Children who had amazing talent to change the world, unrecognized by others, envied, resented, cut down before they could bear fruit. Jaunt is an organization that was made to protect and nurture such children. It is not public because certain issues are sensitive...but it is a real organization that receives support from the government, do you understand?”

Apparently Jaunt wasn't the organization's official name, just a nickname, related to a power that appeared in a sci-fi novel. It got used for convenience and stuck.

“The jaunte appears in a novel by Alfred Bester as a special phenomenon. Do you know the word...*teleportation*? In Japanese... *shunkan idou*, right? Of course, this is not a thing proven by science. In this story, this is a fictional power to move a human being by force of will regardless of walls and distance. The people of the future discover it as a new mode of transportation to replace vehicles. But that is not all. It is also portrayed as a mode of rebirth responsible for changing the world.”

Alice spoke with her eyes shining brightly.

“Jaunting is a dynamic symbol of a fierce drive for power. By jaunting, people can break through stagnation and reach new heights. It is the innovation to be pursued. It is a new adaptation. It is the signpost to an open future. That is the jaunte.”

She went on about the organization she belonged to. “Originally, Jaunt was an acronym created from the initials of the founders of the organization, but now that principle is itself the name of the organization. An organization that seeks out, protects, and supports rare talents so that they are not buried by the world. To find a better future. That is the name of our organization—Jaunt. In other words, it is not as if I have forgotten the official name. Jaunt has essentially become the official name.”

She bragged that her surname, Foyle, had been given to her by the current chair. She’d thrown away her genetic family name when she joined.

Later, I learned even more about Alice. Her first name hadn’t been given to her by her parents, either. She chose it herself the day she was taken in by Jaunt. Her environment changed so drastically that she renamed herself. I bet it was after *Alice in Wonderland*. She probably wanted to be like the blonde girl in that old animated movie.

I didn’t realize it at the time, but that wasn’t her natural hair color. Her hair was black, but she bleached it blonde.

“Before I was discovered by Jaunt,” Alice went on, “I did not understand my talents. I only lived by inertia. It is because of Jaunt that I am happy today.”

“Sounds fishy,” Nanami said. “Like someone selling good luck charms or a proselytizing cult.”

“Oh, dear, Tenjou, are you knowledgeable about such subjects? If not, then politely shut up. You nobodies just simplify things that are beyond your level of comprehension. How *awful*! Oh, well, I am used to groundless persecution.”

“You think it’s groundless? Think a liiittle harder about that with that genius brain of yours, you little—you little genius girl...”

“Look, knock it off, Tenjou,” I said.

Yukari moaned a regretful “Ohhh, Ten-chan...”

Sorry for making excuses, but I think Yukari and I got unlucky

with our timing of becoming closer. It came so soon after my run-in with the Tokyo Ripper. I think by then, I had recovered from the shock of both being attacked and of having my left hand repaired with a cell phone. Or maybe those events hadn't sunk in yet, but at the very least, I was calm and didn't fear the Yukari who had beaten the culprit, nor was I screaming and running away from her (though I hear Nanami was like that for a while). However, I deeply understood one thing: Yukari's power went beyond seeing people as robots.

She'd completely restored my left arm after it was cut off. And the same day my severed hand was put back on, I was able to use it just fine. Can modern medicine do that? Wouldn't you say—and who even cares what you say—that Yukari's talent is obviously a precious gift?

Plus, Yukari had identified the true Tokyo Ripper just by looking at photos.

And...that thing, which definitely was there then, that Yukari called her friend...

You don't get called a genius on smarts alone. You qualify for such a description once you've demonstrated a special something that can change the world. In science, in literature, painting, music, political theory, geniuses appeared and created whole new categories. Some people say it takes more than one person to change the world, but those people are nobodies. A genius is someone who can move the world by themselves: A person who provides the drive for the world to change. Of course, there are limits to the power of one single person, but it is the power of genius that can generate hordes of fans and turn them into patrons.

Just as Alice said, Yukari was a genius. It was true that there was no way to prove Yukari's claim that people looked like robots to her. She'd lived normally other than being considered a little funny.

But what had happened to Nanami and me was unmistakably real. In contrast to Yukari's claims about how things looked, it was reproducible and verifiable. If people found out about how we'd been fixed, about the details of those purple eyes, one could be sure the world would be thrown into a state of panic.

If her power could be explained, it would be a revolution in modern science.

My friend Marii Yukari could genuinely reshape the world.

Though I was Yukari's friend, there was nothing I could do to nurture that talent. I couldn't guide it, and I couldn't hide what she had done. Yukari, for her part, seemed to feel responsible for the Tokyo Ripper's attack on me and for my having been victimized because of her. Again, sorry for making excuses, but it was the timing.

At first, Alice unyieldingly kept trying to persuade Yukari. She told her, "You can't stay among nobodies. They'll betray you one day. You'll get hurt. Even if they look friendly, deep down they're afraid of us, they're making fun of us behind our backs, that's how nobodies are." But once Alice realized that I really accepted Yukari, as well as what had happened to me, and that Yukari's trust in me was unshakable, Alice changed her strategy. She approached me and said, "Hatou, if you truly accept Yukari, you should also be aware how fantastic and how precious her talent is. Do you not think that to leave it to dwell among nobodies is a *betrayal* of your duty to humankind?"

"But...that's... That's got nothing to do with Yukari. Let her live her own life!"

"Yes. I understand. However, those are the words of a spoiled child. People have obligations to society. To begin with, regardless of how you and Yukari feel, do you think you can hide forever? It is true that her talent is difficult to comprehend, but we found her nonetheless, you see."

Apparently, Yukari's father used to be a big shot at the National Police Agency. (Not the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department—The National Police Agency.) She wouldn't tell me the details, but basically, he retired from his job, and they moved out here when they discovered Yukari saw things differently. Yukari told me she thought they did it for her sake, though the fact that her father had left his job because of her weighed heavily on Yukari. Maybe because of her guilt, she had helped her father's successor with his job for a while on the condition that it stay off the record.

However, her efforts to hide her involvement backfired, drawing the attention of someone. Investigations were made, which revealed that she was saying that people looked like robots to her. These investigations also went into what happened with Nanami.

Then they found out what happened with me. It was the decisive blow.

Truth be told, it wasn't as if no one had ever heard Yukari saying

strange things. She'd even been bullied for it as a child and had lost friends over it. But those cases had usually ended in a "Yeah, so?" Whether her words were true or not, there was no way you could verify them with your own eyes, and they had no practical consequence anyway. That was what people thought, until what happened to me occurred.

Until the killer suddenly changed.

Leaving Nanami's case aside, mine definitely resolved itself in a way that looked unnatural. A serial killer had held me hostage in a factory. Large bloodstains and a bloodied weapon had been found, and the blood was conclusively identified as mine. But I came out of it without a scratch or the slightest sign of hemorrhage, and Yukari, who had faced the criminal alone, was likewise unharmed. The killer had just turned herself in as if she'd had a change of heart out of nowhere. We had no idea who'd put what kind of pressure where, but there wasn't a single page written on us in the police report. It was all off the record. It would be harder *not* to find anything weird about that.

"It is unfortunate, but I still have not heard from Yukari what happened there," Alice said. "For the time being, there is only circumstantial evidence, but anyone who has a functioning brain, even a nobody, should be able to infer from that well enough. That is why I came, and that is why I ask you again: do you really think you can hide forever? And let me also ask you: if Yukari is found by an organization not like us, but of nobodies who only think of how to abuse her talent, will you be able to protect her?"

Alice was relentless in her argument. "We can. Jaunt was created to protect talents like Yukari's and mine from such nobodies. We have the organizational power to accomplish it." In my silence, she continued. "I shall repeat the important part, Hatou. Will you be able to protect her? Does a nobody such as you have such power?"

There was no way to answer a question so closed-ended.

It was the timing.

Having previously quit and moved for their daughter's sake, Yukari's parents were shaken up by what had happened to me. They worried that something might happen again, that this time we were lucky, but next time someone might get hurt. They didn't force this on

her, though. In fact, they respected her feelings about it.

I didn't check, but probably Alice told Yukari something similar—like that she couldn't just keep lurking in the shadows forever. Someday, someone would notice her talent. There was nothing wrong with that in and of itself, but they might try to use it with ill intent. They might take a hostage or attack for some unusual reason like in my case. (Nobodies were always trying to oppress people somehow or other.) So, could she say with confidence that next time, she'd be able to protect her friends the way she did this time?

Even if Alice did convince Yukari that way, I couldn't accuse Alice of being a coward. I'd also be running from the truth if I ignored the danger that came with being Yukari's friend. It would be too late to wait until a certain fatal something happened. And most importantly, though one might have accused her of intimidation, Alice wasn't kidding at all.

There's no way I can stay calm when thinking about Alice Foyle. It's probably because in my heart of hearts, I felt as if Alice was the one who caused Yukari's death. I know this has no logical basis—I've been lashing out at her—but I just can't stop thinking that way.

I've hated her ever since.

And yet I also felt love toward her. Passionate affection, like my hatred turned itself inside out. A feeling I never intended, which, after meeting Alice *so, so many times over again*, developed inside me before I knew it. A contradictory state of mind, opposites existing simultaneously.

Alice herself was a good girl, free of deception. She disdained us as nobodies, but that came with her desire not to get hurt. That's something I know all too well. I'm about to meet her so, so many times over again: about to hate her, love her, protect her, kill her, and learn things I never wanted to know. That's how I know. That's how I know Alice wasn't her real name. That's how I know Alice dyed her hair.

That's how I know Alice was bullied—and called the spawn of the devil.

Alice had no father. Alice's young mother got hooked on drugs first, and then a cult. When Alice was born, her mother considered Alice to be a gift from God herself. But when Alice started showing her

talent and diverging from the norm, she took it as a symbol of sin. She figured her prior drug abuse had affected her child. She decided that Alice was the spawn of the devil, born of drugs, and considered it her atonement to make Alice reform herself “correctly.”

I know.

I know that it was only a twisted ambition for self-expression. To Alice’s mother, Alice was nothing more than a symbol of her own atonement. For Alice to exist as Alice was a sin. Until Alice was rescued by Jaunt, she lived always thinking of herself as worthless. Not lived—was left alive, rather, as proof that her mother was being born again in the image of God.

Once, Alice asked me, “Hatou, what do you think of the way Yukari sees? Does it in fact disgust you?”

“No. Not at all. I think Yukari’s eyes are great. Rich, even.”

“Quite right, Hatou. It is as you say. You are very perceptive for a quasi-nobody. Indeed, Yukari’s purple eyes are a great wonder that reveal the richness of this world. They should be celebrated as a gift from heaven above. And so why must Yukari continue to hide them as if there were something wrong with them? Why is it wrong for Yukari to be herself?”

Why?

Alice did her best to persuade Yukari. *Come to Jaunt. If you come to Jaunt, you won’t have to hide your unique eyes. If you come to Jaunt, you can be yourself. If you come to Jaunt, everything will be okay. No one will persecute you for being a genius. No one will denigrate you for your strange talent.*

“Yukari, you should come to Jaunt. Join us, your comrades, who have the same talents.”

That’s right. It wasn’t Yukari who was looking for a friend, but Alice. It wasn’t Yukari who needed friends and comrades—it was Alice. She needed friends who were somebodies, people who had the same talent as her. Allies who would neither put her down for her talent nor betray her. That was why she was working so hard.

She just wanted a friend.

That was why she was so desperate to scout Yukari, whom she perceived as a kindred soul. So how could I accuse Alice of being

cowardly?

I couldn't—we couldn't—protect Yukari alone. Not from serial killers, shadowy organizations, or the world. But if she went with Alice to Jaunt, they'd protect her. She wouldn't have to hide. She wouldn't have to conceal what she saw every day.

There was more.

At this gathering place for potential world-changing geniuses, they might even be able to refine Yukari's ability. They might be able to unravel the mystery of why humans looked like robots to her and her alone. And then Yukari might be able to share what she witnessed with someone else. Then she would truly no longer be alone.

So what was I supposed to do? If I really considered myself Yukari's friend, shouldn't I prioritize her long-term well-being over some temporary emotions? And if so, then what should I do?

What could I, a nobody, do for a somebody like Yukari?

If I was a true friend and not just a superficial one, then what I had to do was—

In the end, it was a phone call that made me decide what to do. That night, I was lying awake agonizing over my choice, which I'd pretty much made already, but still couldn't admit to making. Then I got a phone call—to my left hand, whose number hardly anyone knew.

I never could have guessed who it was.

Chapter 4: The Mysterious Call and Our Parting

I ONCE ASKED YUKARI if humans looked like robots, then what kind of robot did I look like? She replied that I was a multipurpose robot. Writing it that way, it makes me sound like some sold-by-the-lot goon robot, but the way Yukari described it, I was apparently pretty unique. I looked like I could support all kinds of peripherals and adapt to any situation given the right options.

And as if to prove her words, the cell phone she used as a part to repair my left hand continued to work as a cell phone even after becoming my new limb. It looked like a perfectly normal left hand, and yet I was able to make and receive calls with it.

Nanami's body had similarly been repaired using a jungle gym, but it didn't get any features like suddenly turning to steel or being harder than an average person's body parts, so it seems this phenomenon was limited to me.

By the way, I couldn't use my ability any time I felt like it. There were a few constraints. First, it had to be nighttime. I couldn't use it when the sun was up, regardless of how bright it was. It didn't have to be pitch-black, but it had to be in a relatively dark indoor space. Also, my hand wouldn't work at all as a phone unless I was all by myself. (Sometime afterward, I lost this restriction, call it evolution or what have you.) But the biggest thing was that it used so much of my energy. Once I even collapsed from hunger while I was talking to Yukari on the phone. I was also watching a Hollywood movie on TV at the time. A cell phone needs power, and in the case of my left hand, its power came from my body, so naturally it used my energy instead of electricity.

It wasn't originally a cell phone, after all, but my normal left hand. Using it as a cell phone consumed a ridiculous amount of my energy, and not even linearly, but exponentially, it seemed like. I was starving before I knew it. I started shivering when it wasn't even cold, I got dizzy, I sweated in clammy, cold waterfalls. After using it one night, I weighed myself and found I'd lost a whole kilo in two hours. That was no joke! Yukari ended up coming to save me that time too. After that, I started keeping a supply of honey or sweets in my room for when I

wanted to use the phone.

You get the picture.

One of the police got me a new everyday phone. The phone in my left hand was reserved for Yukari only. I didn't tell my family about it, or even Nanami. So when I got the call, I assumed it was Yukari and answered it without the slightest hesitation. And now, this will sound strange, but I was on the phone before it rang. I don't know how, but I knew it. I knew the call was coming. It wasn't as if it made a brief click of a connection like a landline phone being picked up, and yet I felt the call coming and answered it before it rang.

That wasn't all—I *knew who it was before they opened their mouth.*

Before I even heard a voice, I realized it wasn't Yukari. My body froze in the shock of getting a call from someone so impossible. Who knew whether the person on the other end knew this as they croaked as if crying alone:

“Please...Yukari will die if you don't do something.”

By the time I regained control of myself, they'd already hung up. Even so, I kept staring at the palm of my left hand for a long time. Even after the screen, which glowed through my skin, turned off.

It was easily explained. A hallucination. Yes, certainly, an auditory hallucination. When I thought about it, I hadn't heard it ring. That meant no one had actually called me. I was just hearing things. Right, I'd been worrying too much about Yukari. I was worn out. I'd fallen asleep for a second, maybe.

Wait. Yukari will die...?

I breathed in through my nose and out through my mouth, trying to calm myself down as I told myself, *Yeah, sure, I know I can't just sit here. Deep down, I know what's best for Yukari. It's just that I don't have the courage to make the choice and it's haunting me, and that's why I'm hearing things like this.*

Right, it was impossible. There was no way the caller could have been *me*. There was no way the one at the other end could have been *me*. The voice I heard from my left hand was different from my own voice as I was used to hearing it. Even so, I knew it was my voice. I

realized that the one speaking at the other end was me.

But that couldn't be true.

It had to be a stress-induced hallucination.

It couldn't be reality.

I told myself to keep my mind steady until I got there. And then I made a decision.

The next day, I told Yukari. Not straight the way I normally would, but fearfully. I just said maybe she should consider Alice's proposal—at least as one possible option. I said I'd still be her friend even if we were apart, even if she chose to go to Jaunt.

"We can see each other anytime—well, I guess not, but you should be able to come back on breaks, right? I guess I could even visit. Anyway, I'm saying, even if you decide to leave, I'll always be your friend. Right?"

Yukari hesitated before replying, "...Mm-hmm. I guess."

"Well, you know, I'll still be here waiting for you, as long as it takes. I mean...if you decide to do it, that is..."

It was so hypocritical and stupid. We all know kids' friendships almost always end after they move away. But I somehow believed that I was different, that I could stay friends with Yukari forever.

In the end, it was my words that made Yukari's decision. It was my agreement. That's right: Yukari had no way of deciding differently after I said that to her.

It was me. I was her friend, and I drove her to it.

Yukari stayed for the closing ceremony of the third term, and then she moved away with Alice. Apparently, Jaunt's school had a dorm, so her family didn't go with her; she went by herself (of course, they all checked it out together on winter vacation and finished the paperwork as a family).

It was less than half a year later that I learned that Yukari had died.

Chapter 5:

The One on the Other End and My Talent

ONE OF THE THINGS that Alice used to sway Yukari was Jaunt's school.

Alice bragged, "Yukari, if you come to Jaunt, you can receive the finest education. You don't even have to share a uniform curriculum with nobodies. You can study what you *need*. Did you know that the great inventor Thomas Edison was a problem child in school? Or that even Einstein, who created the theory of relativity, dropped out of school? I don't think you need me to tell you that both of them were true geniuses, like ourselves. It was the school that was at fault. Their schools were not capable of providing them an education that would meet their needs. But you have no need to worry about Jaunt's school in that regard. You can learn about yourself in an ideal environment, along with fellow geniuses such as us. Someday, you may even be able to unravel the mystery of your eyes!"

"Oh! You...really think so?"

"Of course I do! The school is for geniuses, and it is a wide, wide world. Is there not a Japanese saying, 'The frog in the well does not know of the sea and thinks that the well is the whole world'? Or was that a Chinese saying? Never mind, I have the perfect analogy for you, Yukari. The philosopher Frank Jackson devised a thought experiment called 'Mary's room.' Have you heard of it?"

Alice explained the scenario as follows: Mary the brilliant scientist has lived her whole life in a black-and-white room. There are no windows, and the TV is black and white. She's never seen any proper colors. Nonetheless, she is a genius, and her powerful brain knows all the scientific information there is to know about color. Her understanding of the physics that define color is perfect. There's just one thing: she's only ever experienced the black-and-white room and never actually seen colors for herself. Then, when she's released from the black-and-white room and steps out into the outside world bursting with color, is there nothing left for her to learn, or if not, what is this new thing that she learns?

“The thrust of the thought experiment is, where does the new thing Mary learns come from? But in this case, you can ignore that. The important point that I am trying to make is that, regardless of what you learn, you will not know until you leave the room. Yukari, you are living in the black-and-white room. Outside there is a world full of color, and now you have been given a chance to step out. Do you understand, Yukari? When Mary leaves the black-and-white room, she must learn something she never could have when she was trapped in that black-and-white world, which is that there is a world that is larger and more beautiful.”

Alice interpreted it along the lines of “The frog in the well knows not the great sea,” but I took interest in a different angle. I thought it was a shame Nanami wasn’t here to hear this. (Nanami, sadly, had been repeatedly baited by Alice to say, “Mari’s no friend of mine!” and had been starting to avoid Alice outright.)

Nanami had told me before it could be that our bodies—no, everything in the world—was made of clouds of probabilities called quanta whose existence was only determined when observed. And it could be that the basis point that determined their existence was the qualia that came up in our heads. It could be that it was the qualia that determined Nanami’s body to be a human’s and not a metal frame. It could be that Yukari both saw our bodies as robots and was able to determine and repair them in terms of robot parts because she had different qualia.

But where did these qualia come from in the first place? Why was it that we saw the same things yet felt different qualia—not just between Yukari and us, but even between Nanami and me? After Yukari left, I started idly thinking about such things. Thinking about out-of-the-ordinary concepts like qualia made me feel as if I were still connected to Yukari somehow, and in fact, I was interested in the things that were going on in my body. So I started studying all kinds of things. By this time, Nanami and I weren’t close anymore, so I had to do it by myself, but I still had a very reliable partner.

At night, I grabbed a sweet drink—or maybe it was some candy?—and made a call with my left hand.

“Hello? Uh...I’ll just check, but this is the first time we’ve talked, isn’t it?”

“Well, it is and it isn’t. Man... Uh, hello, *me*?”

It was a call to the “me” in another world.

I thought of calling myself because that mysterious phone call had been bugging me all this time. No matter how I thought about it, it seemed like the one who had called was “me.” But how could I call myself? It was beyond preposterous. So I figured it must have been a delusion, a hallucination, a figment of my imagination. Yet that voice wouldn’t get out of my head. I’d glance at my left hand and those words warning me of the danger to Yukari would come back so real.

For some time after she left, I kept in touch with Yukari by phone. But with the time difference and all, pretty soon we switched over to writing letters. (My left hand had an email feature, I guess, but I didn’t know how to use it.) The first letter I got after that change said indirectly that she wouldn’t be able to keep in touch as regularly from here on out. There were lots of things to do and she wouldn’t have time until things settled down.

It was good she was busy, I reassured myself. I missed her, but it was for her sake.

One night I was struggling with myself like that, looking at my left hand, when it hit me: What if I called myself? Wouldn’t I hear myself? That’s right—*myself*. It wasn’t as if I really thought I’d get whoever had called me that night. It was more just that I suddenly got the urge to hear my voice through my phone. If I went ahead and listened to my own voice, I’d realize the voice from back then wasn’t mine—that would be a relief. That would prove that that call was just me being confused or some kind of crossed-wire situation. I wanted to verify what had happened. Once I reasoned it like that, I couldn’t hold back anymore, and I gave it a try then and there. You’d think it would have occurred to me that if I called myself, I’d just get a busy signal, but at the time, such thoughts never crossed my mind. So I called my own number.

“Hello, Yuka... Huh? Wait, who are you? *Me?*”

“Whoa, no way... Huh? *Me?!?*”

I was literally talking to myself.

This might be hard to believe, but I figured that if this was really happening, there it was, and just like the thing with the serial killer, it didn't take me long to accept it.

From that time forward, almost every night, I'd call myself, or sometimes get called by myself, but not once did I end up talking to the same me I talked to the first night. Actually, not once did I end up talking to the same me at all—I know this is a strange expression. The one on the other end was always a me I'd never met, and at the same time a me I shared knowledge and experience with. There were differences in the details—for instance, the “me” I talked to this night had talked to a lot more “mes” than I had—but the moment the call connected, the other's information soaked right into my head. Just as I'd known who it was without words the first time, the other one's thoughts, and what she was about to say, it all bubbled up in my head as if it was me. Sometimes it was hard for me to even tell who was talking.

Regardless, we talked aloud. We tacitly understood that we already understood each other before we spoke, but it just seemed like things would be confusing otherwise. At first, we got stuck, but after accepting it, we were able to talk as if it were perfectly natural. And after I accepted it, the one on the other end was always a “me” who'd already accepted it. It seemed that basically the “current” me was the reference point.

So, we accepted things as they were and talked about all kinds of stuff—especially this situation. Who in the world was this “me” I was talking to? How did this happen?

“You think it could be what Tenjou talked about? Like, ‘me’ in a parallel world?” I asked.

“It could also be another possible ‘me.’ It could be either the Copenhagen interpretation or the Many-worlds interpretation. Or there's even this thing called the Pilot-wave theory!”

I'd never heard of the Pilot-wave interpretation before, but by the time “I” said it, I already understood it—as far as “I” did, at least.

“I” continued to speak, apparently a more diligent student than I had ever been. “Well, it’s not as if we could figure out which is correct when even all these smart scientists still haven’t settled on a conclusion. What we should be thinking about now is why the heck is this happening to me?”

“Good question. The ‘me’ who I talked to yesterday had a hypothesis about that. She said maybe it’s because of my left hand. So... take this with a grain of salt since it was ‘me’ saying this and not a scientist, okay? If we look at this from the point of view of the Copenhagen interpretation for ease of understanding, first of all, the properties of a quantum are such that it’s not determined until it’s observed.”

“Right.”

“And Yukari repaired Tenjou’s body with steel bars. But Tenjou can only observe that as her own body, so the repaired part of Tenjou’s body is, in a sense, just a normal body. Are you following me?”

“Go on.”

“But then in my case, well, you remember what Yukari was saying? That I’m multipurpose, adaptable, able to support all kinds of peripherals, and whatnot? So unlike Tenjou, I was able to accept this left hand as just being like that and adapted. Being like both a left hand and a cell phone.”

“Hmm.”

“So what I’m speculating is, in quantum terms, right now, my left hand is a superposition of a left hand *and* a cell phone. Because I’ve adapted to that, I’m able to use it as either one. Something like that...”

Maybe my left hand was a superposition of the countless possibilities of the Copenhagen interpretation, or else in a state of interference between the countless parallel worlds of the Many-worlds interpretation and had still not been determined. Or perhaps it had been determined as just that. Regardless of which interpretation was correct, it didn’t change the results. Behind my left hand was my body, my head, and myself. Thus, through this left hand, I was connected to the countless versions of myself across the countless possibilities or parallel worlds...

“That could be why, through this left hand, I’m able to talk to the ‘mes’ I wouldn’t normally be able to meet because of wave function

collapse or loss of interference.”

“Huh... So in other words, here I am using my left hand as a cell phone, so that means I recognize it not only as a left hand but also as a cell phone. I accept the mes of other worlds or other possibilities, and that’s why we’re able to talk like this—so that’s how it is?”

I groaned. “It sort of makes sense to me and sort of doesn’t. Ugh... I’m feeling dizzy. I really wonder how this is happening. If it’s the case that I’m talking to a possible me through my left hand, then does that mean as soon as I hang up and the cell phone stops being a cell phone, it’s determined as only a left hand and you disappear? Until it becomes a cell phone again...”

“Hey, wait a minute. Why would I disappear? Aren’t *you* the one who would disappear?”

“Hey, hey, hey! I’m the one who—huh?” I realized I couldn’t remember who’d made the call. Not that it would change anything... “I guess we’ll go with parallel worlds, then, huh? Not that that makes a lot more sense to me...”

“Yeah...”

I said good night and hung up. And then I started to disappear—just kidding, but I did break open a bag of snacks to replenish my energy. I thought about the one I’d just been talking to. Had she disappeared? Or was she snacking just like me in a parallel world or something? But I think that even in the many-worlds interpretation, worlds are both created and destroyed—well, in any case it wouldn’t change the result, and I doubt I’ll ever talk to her again.

Am I really the same me I was before the call?

I knew things I didn’t before the call, like the pilot wave interpretation, but that didn’t prove anything, nor did it change the result. I stopped worrying about it.

“Have you heard that according to the research of these guys Roger Penrose and Stuart Hameroff, the human brain may itself be a kind of quantum computer? Apparently they think a quantum-mechanical process that occurs in something called ‘microtubules’

inside nerve cells may be responsible for consciousness.”

“Quanta produce consciousness? But isn’t everything in the world made of quanta? So does that mean that robots may have consciousness even if they’re not people? Yukari might be happy to hear that... Oh, yeah, I’ve been wanting to ask, but what’s a quantum computer?”

“Don’t ask me when you know I don’t know.”

I struggled a bit at first, but allow me to sing my own praises: who, but me, could adapt to this situation so easily? I started to think it wasn’t so bad to be able to talk to myself. In fact, it instilled a kind of hope in me. I had to credit Yukari for fixing me like this, but still, couldn’t you say this was my talent? At the very least, you couldn’t call someone who could talk to themselves in a parallel world (or other possibility) a nobody, now could you?

I decided to study as much as I could. I wanted to make some kind of use of this talent of mine. If I could demonstrate a good use for this talent which even Yukari praised as the ultimate in multipurpose capabilities, maybe even I could get into Jaunt, I thought. I have to admit, even at this point I was just a third-year junior high school kid and wasn’t aware of how special I was. Jaunt would have been delighted to welcome me if they knew I could do this, even if I didn’t study. But I didn’t realize that, so I read like crazy. I said I was studying for entrance exams, quit the *naginata* entirely, and spent all my time at home at my desk and all my time outside at the library. I grabbed whatever books I found and kept increasing my vocabulary of terms like “the hard problem of consciousness,” “the double-slit experiment,” and “quantum decoherence.” (Did I know what they meant? Did I understand them? Don’t ask.)

I ruefully thought to myself that it was pretty funny for Hatou Manabu to be studying waves (*hadou wo manabu*, as it’s said in Japanese) and tried to study wave functions. Then I learned I had zero talent for math. I started to feel as if equations killed my parents. Reality is harsh: this world contains all kinds of things that are completely out of the reach of a third-year junior high school student. But still I did my best, in collaboration with the other “mes.” I used almost all my free time increasing my knowledge of anything that seemed useful. (That said, “I” am “me” after all, so there was no parallel world with a “me” so brave as to tackle wave functions again.)

I thought if I tried hard enough, I could be by Yukari’s side.

I didn't give a second thought to the lack of contact from Yukari.

"I wonder if she'll come back for summer vacation?"

"Sure she will. Alice might come back too. I'd love to have this *thing* in a shape to show off by the time they get here, though."

"But it doesn't really have much practical use, does it? It might mean something to me, but it doesn't to anyone else, and I can't even use this phone in front of other people. Oh, man, it's frustrating. I wonder if this is how Yukari felt."

Then it was good. I could understand how Yukari felt now. Yeah, right.

When she gets back, I'll tell her all about it, I thought to myself. Meanwhile I wrote all the terms that seemed like they could help explain what was happening to me in a notebook and talked to myself on the phone, and I waited eagerly to see her face when she came back and saw my talent.

But in the end, she didn't come back.

There wasn't even a body.

Be warned, reader: the story takes a sharp left turn from here.

Chapter 6: Death and the Properties of Light

AFTER WE PAID HONOR to our ancestors for Obon, we got a call from Yukari's mother, telling us that Yukari had died. It was because of some kind of experiment, she said. There was an accident big enough to destroy the building, and little of her body remained. A Japanese Jaunt representative came to Japan with a small urn and told her parents, "We're sorry, but we went ahead and cremated her because it was so gruesome an event."

They said they didn't know the details, but that was what they were sent to tell them, and Jaunt's representative couldn't provide more information about the accident that killed Yukari because it was classified. Shocked, Yukari's parents wept. Yukari's mother, brother, and sister flew into an open rage, yelling at the Jaunt representative. "How could this happen, less than half a year after Yukari left?!" they demanded.

Yukari's father asked quietly, "Will you please give us more information? We want to know the facts. An experiment? What kind of experiment? What kind of safeguards were you taking in a place where children were? National secrets? Confidentiality? What about human rights? What about how we trusted you with our *child*?! If you don't give us some satisfactory answers, we'll have a thing or two to say about it!"

Anyone who knew about Yukari's eyes ought to have been able to see that her death was super fishy, whether or not they were her bereaved parents. Then, I was too dazed to think about anything.

Maybe they expected it or maybe they respected the influence Yukari's father still commanded at the National Police Agency even after he retired, but in any case, Jaunt gave Yukari's father permission to inspect the organization. They said they didn't see the necessity, but they would make a gesture of goodwill. *See for yourself and you'll understand how critical matters are here*, they said.

Yukari's funeral was held in Japan, at Yukari's house, quietly. It was all adults there. There were police and government bigwigs too. I

was the only kid present. None of our old classmates had been invited—not even Nanami.

Thinking back on it, maybe Yukari's parents knew about Nanami's trauma, and how Nanami started getting over it as a result of Yukari's departure. Maybe that's why they didn't reach out to her. That said, I'm not going to call them cold.

At that time, I myself didn't give a flying fig for Nanami. Not only did I not care that Nanami wasn't there, I was too preoccupied to even think of it, standing there silently in summer in a desolate winter forest of scattered adults dressed in somber black.

I remember facing the coffin laid on a platform of plain wood and thinking, *Huh, Yukari's body's not in there*. Time had frozen for me.

Everything seemed dark and bleak in my eyes.

Then something gold flashed in the corner of my eye. In my drab, black-dotted field of vision, the color stood out so conspicuously, I was entranced. It took me a second to register that it was the color of someone's hair.

Yeah, I remember that hair color, the shape of that back. She looked totally different in her black clothes and tied-up hair, but there was no mistaking it. Before me was the one who'd taken Yukari away.

"Alice...?"

My voice was practically a whisper, yet the blonde girl turned as if pulled in by the sound. We made eye contact. Beneath her swollen eyelids, her eyes were as cloudy as those of a sick fish, terrified and totally lacking the audacious sparkle they once held. Before I could open my mouth, though, Alice averted her eyes and walked away, turning her back to escape my gaze. She promptly disappeared down the hall.

Before I knew it, I was running after her. I didn't care that everyone was looking at me. I ran down the hall and out the door. Even though we were in the middle of a funeral, the sky outside was shining bright, and it made me dizzy for a second. Despite my hustle, Alice was gone. I looked around and spotted a long, black car on a street far from Yukari's house. Alice had just opened the door. "Alice!" I shouted.

Alice flinched. She obviously heard me, but she didn't look at me. She just got in the car and closed the door. I couldn't see her face

through the tinted window. I ran after the car. The engine revved and the car drove off, but I didn't stop. I kept running, glaring as the car got smaller. The pain of pebbles stabbing my feet alerted me that I wasn't wearing shoes. I'd run so hard, I'd flown out in my socks. But even so, I willed myself onward. When the black car completely disappeared from my vision, all at once my feet and my whole body shook. I slumped to the ground right where I was. At last, I realized I was crying.

The tears wouldn't stop.

Alice ran away from me. Alice, who once called me a nobody and picked an unending fight with the entire world. Alice, who told me I couldn't protect Yukari.

Alice, who bragged that she and Jaunt could.

She ran away from me.

My fists clenched in rage. But what then made them quiver was neither anger nor indignation, but doubt. Why would Alice run—Alice, who was so proud? Why did she run away from me like a skulking mouse? Did she do something wrong? Was it that she failed to protect Yukari? Was it that she'd talked a good game and then let her die a meaningless death?

Weren't you Yukari's friend? Did you do something that makes it impossible to call yourself that anymore?!

If not, why would you run in the middle of her funeral?

If I had thought about it objectively, I should have been able to see it: no matter how precocious she was, no matter how much of a genius she might be, Alice was still a child. I shouldn't have been surprised to see her run, unable to face me. But I wanted something to rely on, to shield me from a reality I didn't want to believe. I had to have something to cling to or I'd lose my mind. For that reason, I assumed that Alice ran because she was ashamed.

Maybe Yukari's death wasn't an accident...

I didn't have any real proof. I was mostly just taking out my frustration. Yet I got stuck on that idea. I needed it. A color to paint my blank mind. Something to burn on the fuel of my feelings so I wouldn't have to think.

A goal.

At last, I'd found an excuse to avert my eyes from the reality I didn't want to face. With a strange sense of satisfaction, I thought: *If you want to run, run all you want, Alice. I won't let you get away. Not until I find what it is that's eating you up inside.*

I can grieve after that.

"I swear I'm gonna find Alice," I mumbled half to myself. "And I'm gonna interrogate her. If she's not in Japan, then I'll follow her to America."

"I" answered, "Yeah. Except for one thing. It's not 'me' who's gonna chase her down. It's *us*."

"Yeah, you're right. *We* will."

"Absolutely. We're gonna get her *together*."

We both agreed that first I should try questioning Yukari's father. I'd ask him to take me along to inspect Jaunt. I'd have to miss school, but whatever.

Yukari's father was reluctant. My parents weren't hot on the idea, either. It's not good to miss school—it could even affect my entrance exams—and after all I'd said about studying for them, it's no wonder my parents looked askance. But I didn't budge: day after day, I went to Yukari's house and made my appeal directly. Shamelessly I claimed to be the one who knew Yukari the best, and I hinted that there was a secret promise between us (which unfortunately was not true).

I gave the impression that I knew something about Yukari's death, as if I had received her final wishes—and of course I didn't know anything, but I was positive there was something. I tried everything I could think of to plead my case. I even indirectly threatened them. And I told them about how my left hand was a cell phone (though of course I couldn't show them proof, so I'm not so sure they believed me).

Yes, I tried every possibility that presented itself; Probably the

clinch was when I got a passport application. I thrust the form in front of my parents and demanded their signatures. And I told them that if Yukari's father wouldn't take me, then fine, I'd get there by myself—without a guardian. *If you think I can't do it, you have another think coming! At the very least, I'm not going to give up until I try everything I can!!!*

Finally, my parents caved to my stubbornness—which they'd long known well—and joined me in asking Yukari's father to take me. That's how at last it was settled that I was going to Jaunt.

How do I explain this? It's hard.

So why don't I start by just telling you what happened?

Jaunt paid the travel expenses not only for Yukari's family but even for me, and even booked the flight for us. We left Japan right away. Our plane soared through the night sky.

And then blew up over the Pacific Ocean.

The last things I saw before I died were the oxygen masks dropping from the ceiling, the face of Yukari's mother looking back at me worriedly, and my left hand, its screen faintly lit. The next moment, the burning flames engulfed me.

I shot up in the dark.

It was like I was awoken by rage. Yes, the shock of being killed was not as intense as the rage boiling inside me. The indignation overcame everything.

I didn't consider for a moment the possibility it could have been an accident. *They blew up an airplane? Who the heck does that?*

That's right—Jaunt had wiped out Yukari's family to avoid inspection and nip any problems right in the bud. They'd killed me and all those passengers who had nothing to do with it and made it look like a complete accident...

It sounds crazy, but what would you expect from people who teach kids to call normal people *nobodies*? And if they had geniuses on their side, then they might be capable of something on this level. Freakin' bastards. Anyway, that settled it. Jaunt was guilty: Yukari hadn't died in an accident.

Jaunt had murdered her.

And I mean, if they had murdered Yukari's family and even me, then they must have been trying to make Yukari do what they wanted, but then Yukari said no, so they—

“Huh?”

Suddenly I realized and looked around. I was lying on my futon. But why? Wasn't I just on a plane? That's right, I was on a plane—and all of a sudden it started rocking—

Was that a dream...?

I was hungry.

I got out of my futon, and my hands spontaneously groped for sweets. I opened a box of caramels, looked at the digital clock on my desk, and checked the date. *Right, today, I should be flying to America with Yukari's parents, on the airplane already—*

“Wait, what am I talking about?” I asked myself aloud. I searched my memories. *Right!* Now I remembered. *I had managed to get Yukari's parents to call off the investigation.* They weren't enthusiastic about that, but I'd begged them. I asked them to leave Yukari to me. I said I couldn't tell them the details yet, but I had an ally with the power to investigate what happened to Yukari, so please, call off the investigation and leave it to me.

I was as incredulous as anyone would be that they actually took my word.

So of course I wasn't on the plane—of course no one was dead.

Look at this. Look at this world!

My left-hand phone rang. I put a caramel in my mouth, answered

the phone, and said, “Hello?”

“Um!” said the voice on the other end, out of breath. “Uh, well, sorry. I know it’s late. Were you sleeping?”

“No. But I think this is the second time I’ve had this call, and it’s probably the same for you. So maybe we should get right to the point.”

“S-so—you felt it too?”

“Mm-hmm.”

We already shared our memories and understood each other. What in the world had happened to us?

“Just now—that was me in a world where I went to investigate...”

“Or a possibility that I went to investigate.”

It wasn’t a dream. The explosion really happened. It just wasn’t *determined*. It was just one possibility that had arisen and disappeared, in a parallel world.

“So what about us? We’re in the world where we didn’t go investigate?”

“Yeah. Probably your world and my world differ in some details, but I think that’s the case. *Sorry*—I’m getting dizzy. You must be too, right? I think I’d better get some energy in me. You should too.”

“Uh, yeah, you’re right. ‘Kay, bye.”

I hung up, popped a second caramel into my mouth, chewed it, and made a face.

The one who died was me. The one who was here now was also me.

What was I?

But that wasn’t the important thing right now. The important thing was—

I burst out laughing.

“Jaunt’s a bunch of psychos,” this parallel version of me said, voice shaking with fear. “To blow up a whole airplane just to keep us

quiet? They're totally off their rockers!"

"Yes, they certainly are," I—that is, the me here—replied, mockingly. "Our enemy is powerful. Thinking back on it, Alice was saying some disturbing stuff about being able to change the world and whatnot. And no, I don't think Alice did it—but we can see that they're putting these ideas into the heads of little kids like Alice. That's what you call brainwashing, right? Man, I can't forgive myself for overlooking that at the time."

"Yes, I agree. But what we're talking about right now—what's important—is something else..."

"Yes," I laughed. "Jaunt is certainly a powerful organization. They'd have to be to get a bomb on a plane. A junior high school girl hardly has a chance against something like that."

"But," "I" continued, "I'm not alone."

"I have *infinite* 'mes' with me."

"Infinite parallel worlds, infinite possibilities. Infinite versions of us."

"Do you remember what Tenjou was saying before about the properties of light? What was it...Fermat's theorem?"

"No, no, it was Fermat's *principle*. A ray of light between two points, of all the possible routes, takes the route that allows it to travel in the least amount of time."

It might sound strange, but light always takes the path to its destination that requires the least amount of time. If there's nothing between the two points, it naturally travels in a straight line—because that's the path that takes the least amount of time. But if there's an obstacle in the middle, like water or air or gravity, it's a different story. For example, light travels more slowly through water than it does through air. If it has to pass through water to go in a straight line, that will slow it down by a lot. Therefore, light chooses a bent path. It takes the route that takes the least amount of time, minimizing the distance it travels through water, without traveling an unnecessary distance through air either.

Think of water like a crowded street: Even if it's the shortest distance, anyone would want to avoid trudging through a jam-packed group of people. You'd want to look for an uncrowded detour if you

could. But if you took a big detour to avoid a jam, that could be even worse because you'd just waste time traveling more than you had to. Light is a master that finds the perfect balance between avoiding jams when feasible and avoiding excessive detours.

That's what's called Fermat's principle.

The funny thing about this principle is that it looks as if light knows the destination it will reach ahead of time. It seems as if it picks the route that arrives in the shortest amount of time with complete awareness of not just the destination, but even what obstacles exist on the way, what mediums it will have to pass through, and what angle of incidence it needs, how it needs to bend. You see, there's no way you could pick the route that arrives in the least amount of time unless you already knew all of the paths before you left and knew which of them were crowded. Yet light finds that route in an instant.

How does it do it?

Nanami said, "This is how quantum mechanics explains it. Light doesn't choose the route that arrives in the least amount of time before it leaves. *It travels every possible route at the same time.* But all the rays that travel routes other than the one that arrives in the least amount of time interfere and cancel each other out. In the end, only the route that connects the two points in the least amount of time is left. That's why it looks as if light always picks the route that arrives first. Light is *also* a quantum, with both wave and particle properties."

So, light too interferes with its own possibilities or parallel worlds. It doesn't know the way to the destination in advance. Its quanta simultaneously travel every path, and in the end only the correct answer is left, the route that connects the two points in the shortest time. Such are the properties of light, from the perspective of quantum mechanics.

"You see it, don't you?" went my conversation over the phone.

"All I have to do is make reaching Alice my only objective."

Right. I just had to become like a beam of light. I just had to think about how to reach Alice in the shortest possible time. Then every "me" would be searching for Alice in every single world. It didn't matter how

big or scary Jaunt was. I had countless possibilities, infinite parallel worlds on my side. And this cell phone of mine allowed “us” to interfere with each other.

“It’s not that difficult. Light doesn’t understand Fermat’s principle or Feynman path integrals, either. Light is just that: light. That’s enough for it to find the route that reaches the destination in the shortest time, so I don’t have to think hard about it either. I simply need to focus on my objective. That just has to be *how I go*. Then eventually one of the infinite ‘mes’ will arrive at the solution, and that’s all that will remain.”

“Just like how the I who didn’t get on the plane stayed around and the ‘me’ who died on it didn’t.”

“Exactly. Only the correct possibility remains uncanceled.”

Yes. I’ll become like light. I’ll use the phone that Yukari gave me. And for now, inevitably, I’ll reach Alice.

Yes—for now.

The best cure for sadness was rage. It was a harsh, bitter medicine, but it saved my heart from splitting wide open from tragedy. Harsh medicine can hurt you, but as always, I adapted to it right away.

I think at this point I’d already quit being Hatou Manabu.

Chapter 8: Turning Point

WHAT STARTED my change of heart was a phone call I got from “me” one night. I’d rather not recount the conversation itself. That said, it was beyond belief. From the bottom of my heart, I was glad no one else heard it. Not to beat a dead horse, but... No, never mind.

At the time, I was attending Jaunt’s school. All the rooms in the dorms were singles, but Alice hung out in mine almost every night. Normally, she was full of pride and constantly bailed me out due to my poor English abilities—Alice was the only one in this school of supposed geniuses who could speak Japanese—but as soon as we were alone, she leaned on me like a little kid. She was almost thirteen, but when I took my eyes off her, she’d start sucking her thumb. It looked like she was regressing to an infantile state. It was creepy and, to be honest, super annoying. But it could also be useful, so I had to take it for what it was despite my growing stress.

Jaunt didn’t raise any particular objection to Alice and me being together. They were suspicious of me and probably cautious of Alice too—I’d confirmed this in other worlds—but for the time being, they merely watched from afar, maybe because they recognized the value of my left hand.

As stated before, I couldn’t use my cell phone in front of people. (There were exceptions, but that was the general rule.) Conversely, if I could use my cell phone, that meant no one was watching. This feature was extremely useful to me. Thus, if I could receive a call to my left hand, it meant that I wasn’t being monitored and Alice was really sleeping.

I was trying to avoid unnecessary contact, but I answered because I had a feeling it might be important. “Hello? What’s up?”

The “me” on the other end spoke with a strange lilt. “Uh, yeah. Sorry. The thing is, well, it’s not as if there’s been some progress or something; it’s just a personal thing I want to talk about.”

“P-personal? Huh?” I was befuddled.

But “I” didn’t seem to care, and announced, “Yeah. You see, I’m...

I'm in love, I think."

As soon as the words hit my ears, I felt my mind go blank. That was just for a moment, of course, as immediately "my" knowledge/experience bubbled up in my disordered brain. "Wha—hey—what are you thinking?"

"What? What's wrong with being in love? In another world, there was another me who was already dating Kasoku, you know?"

"That's not the point! You know what I mean! Hey, wait, wait a second. Please—no! You're definitely confused! You're confusing your maternal instincts or whatever with love! I mean—I mean—like, what I'm saying is—you know Alice is a *girl*, right?"

I hated to admit it, but our shared knowledge and experience told me. I knew who "I" had fallen in love with. I experienced those true feelings "I" felt for her.

Oh, man, what do I do? She's—I mean, "I'm"—in love with a girl—a child at that!

"Is her being a girl a problem...?"

"Yes, it is! She's Alice! She's a child! She's a young girl! I mean, even if we step back and—no, I'm not stepping back one step! You're a sick freak! What are you thinking?! What kind of karma are you looking for? Anyway! It's not love you're feeling!"

"Well...I guess there are different kinds of love though?"

"Shut up! Of all the people it could be, why would you fall in love with *Alice*? That annoying little brat—"

"What are you saying? Alice is cute!"

Whoa. She yelled at me. I was dumbfounded.

"I" ranted on furiously, "What's wrong with Alice? She's so pretty, and she's really courageous. She's so little, but she tries so hard. And—how do I put it—she acts standoffish, but she actually relies on me and it's just, like... Whatever. You know, I don't care what *you* say. I think this is love. And now that I realize it, I can't stay silent anymore. I have to express myself, properly—"

"Don't. I get it, so don't say any more. Aaah, my possibilities are so horrifying..."

Is this really another me? I guess if we're just talking about

possibilities, if there are an infinite number of parallel worlds, there could be a “me” like that...

I didn't know what to say, and “I” murmured, “You really can't understand me?”

“Huh? Well, I'm not saying it's impossible, but probabilistically...”

“No, that's not what I mean. Now that I look at it, I think I looked at Yukari and Tenjou that way too...”

“Shut up! Screw you, you freak! Don't defile my memories like that!”

“Come on, think back. Remember when you met Yukari. Did it gross you out, kissing her all of a sudden?”

“No! That wasn't even a kiss! We collided! And you just said it—I dated Kasoku! We even, uh...went there! And that didn't gross me out! In fact I kind of—”

“Right. But that wasn't *you*, nor was it *me*. You see? Sure it was ‘me,’ but it's just a possibility in a parallel world, you know?”

True: the one who dated Kasoku was a version of “me,” but not me in the here and now. And this freak wasn't me but was “me.”

It's okay. Just accept it. I can adapt quickly to having found a “me” like this and go on with my life—I think. Even if I don't really want to...

I sighed. “Still, no matter how cute she might be, and even if we ignore that she's a girl and a *child*, how can you fall in love with a tool you're trying to exploit?”

“What are you talking about? I don't see Alice as a tool. We've rekindled our friendship and have decided to work hard together.”

As she said this, the memories came flooding in—from “me” into me—and I grasped what she was saying. This “me” was different. After I'd heard the truth by appealing to Alice's conscience, I'd pretended to forgive her. Then I deliberately constructed the one-sided relationship we had now, with Alice dependent on me. Meanwhile, this “I” had told Alice how she felt, been understood, and genuinely repaired their relationship—to the point of falling in love.

As a result, the Alice in that world didn't suck her thumb. Unlike the Alice in my world, she was proud and independent and supported me.

I had to say I was jealous. *If only...*

Maybe that Alice can help me reach my objective...

"No! No way! Definitely not! I can operate better because I'm calm!" I insisted suddenly.

"Do you know what it means to be calm? Maybe it's none of my business, but you're talking about exploiting Alice as a tool. Relationships like that will come back to haunt you."

"Shut up! Is that all you had to say? Then—"

"Oh, right, right. There was something I wanted to ask you. Back in junior high, I—that is, you—"

The line cut out. I acted cool and looked around the room as naturally as I could. Hearing a fretful "Mm," I looked at Alice, in the bed. It seemed I'd woken her.

"Huh? Hatou? Where am I?" she mumbled.

"My room. You can keep sleeping if you want. It's late."

Alice sat up and muttered incomprehensibly for a while without really opening her mouth. Then she lay back down. A while later, I heard her murmur, "Hatou, aren't you going to sleep yet...?"

"Nah," I said. "Sorry. Not quite yet."

After some time, she replied, "You can make your own choices, but it is bad for your skin to stay up late. You are too old to behave in such a manner."

"Um, I'm not *old*. I'm sixteen."

"That is no excuse to stay up late, you know," Alice said with a pout before turning around, her back facing me.

Her behavior was cute and soothing. I sighed. Yes, she was standoffish, but she was cute.

Ugh. Why did I have to be called a sicko by *myself*?

I looked at the palm of my hand and thought about the "me" I'd been talking to. Since junior high school, I'd always been fretting about whether the "mes" I talked to were possible versions of myself or parallel world versions of myself. I still hadn't reached a conclusion on that. Either way, it didn't make any difference since I never got to talk to the same "me" twice.

Apparently, there is a minimum unit of time called the Planck time. To be precise, it's the smallest unit of time that humans can observe. Theoretically, my possibilities or parallel worlds were generated and disappeared every Planck time. That might mean that every Planck time, I became probabilistic, "collapsed," or interfered with parallel worlds. Alice was the one who taught me this, after I made up with her and we started working together.

I approached the bed where Alice lay. She'd left me space to lie next to her, and warmth surged in my heart. I grew increasingly irritated at the "me" I'd been talking to. How could "I" treat adorable Alice like an annoying child or a tool? How could that "me" be a version of me?

Well, what could I do? In that world, I guessed "I" really hadn't made up with Alice. In other words, I and that "I" had different pasts.

That's when it hit me—what Alice had taught me had shown me. I'd already hung up, but I'd confirmed it from the memories I'd shared with "me." So probably in the next world/possibility generated, another "me" would have also realized it.

I sighed, whispered to Alice, slipped under the comforter, and held her in place of a pillow. Alice squirmed. She must have still been awake. But she didn't say anything. So I held her tighter, and I thought to myself: *Thank you, Alice. For showing me. For helping me. And sorry. I love you dearly, but I still can't turn my back on the objective I chose to pursue.*

"Listen."

"Sure. I'm listening. Go on."

"We might be able to change the past."

Chapter 9: To the Past

WHAT STARTED my change of heart was my realization of the difference in how I treated Alice. Now I loved her. In another world, “I’d” hated her. In some worlds, “I’d” treated her as a tool; in some “I” was neutral; and in some, “my” heart swayed between emotions unsteadily. Parallel worlds, by their nature, look very similar but are still different somehow. Possibilities have meaning because they are different. They exist *to be* different. The same thing is never generated twice. Differences are normal—but what do they stem from?

In Alice’s case, the answer was simple. It all came down to the conditions of how I asked her the truth about Yukari’s death, whether I threatened her or persuaded her or guilted her or forgave her. That was clear at a glance, so until now, I’d never given a second thought. I just assumed that the differences in how I treated Alice came from the branching paths the world took in the past.

“But Alice told me it would only make sense for branches to occur right now, whether we’re talking about possibilities or parallel worlds. For quanta, there is no continuous past nor a predictable future. We just feel a certain way, but there is no real past. There’s no future, either. All there is, is a slice of one Planck time we call the present.”

“So what are you getting at?”

“It’s always the case that the present ‘I’ is the origin of the branch, whether it’s a branch in the future or the past. Do you understand now? The differences don’t come from the past. It’s ‘we’ who are generated first, and it’s ‘our’ differences that branch out in both directions, into the future and into the past. It’s not the case that I exist as someone who loves Alice because I made up with her. It’s that first a parallel world or possible me is generated who loves Alice, and then a branch of the past is created in which I made up with Alice, to justify it. Forget about common sense—the process doesn’t create the results. The results lead to the cause. Do you remember what I did for Yukari when we were in junior high?”

“Yes, of course. I trained myself in the *naginata* so I’d be ready for

anything. It sure did prepare me for a lot of stuff that happened.”

Right. I’d taken my *naginata* practice seriously so I could face dangers headed my way. I was still keeping it up now that I was at Jaunt, and it had gotten me out of a lot of tight spots. If I hadn’t kept fit, I probably wouldn’t have made it this far.

“In that case, *when* did I learn about quantum mechanics?”

“Huh?”

“*Naginata* training? No, have you forgotten? You have to remember. After Yukari left, I dropped the *naginata* and read books nonstop. Right. I didn’t train for almost a year. So I ought to be out of shape, but here I am, fit as if I’d never taken a break. Then what happened to the past in which I studied?”

“Well...”

“At that time, the ‘anything’ I had to be ready for was getting into Jaunt. That’s why I studied like mad. Right? It had never crossed my mind that Yukari might have been murdered. There was no reason I should have been training physically. That’s the contradiction. But here I am, totally in shape. Now you get it, right? To reach the truth about Yukari, I needed mobility and stamina—so I changed the past. I threw away a past in which I buried my head in books and chose one in which I kept training. I never realized it because our knowledge is shared, but I’ve probably unconsciously made a lot of changes to the past without realizing it. My treatment of Alice must be like that. Understand?”

“You’re saying...we can create branches in the past, not just the future?”

“Yes. I’m saying, if we branch the past the right way—”

We said the next thought in unison. “We might be able to create a world in which Yukari is alive.”

Something deep inside me told me there was something wrong here, like I was missing something important. But I had to try.

“You really think we can do that?”

“Why wouldn’t we be able to? Haven’t we learned that in physics notation, the past and the future are the same? What doesn’t make

sense is not being able to change the past if you can change the future.”

“But if you change the past, aren’t there, like, time paradoxes? What would happen to the present ‘me’ who isn’t me? Would she just never have existed?”

“I think so. Wave function collapse and loss of interference are irreversible. In other words, you can’t go back. And all ‘my’ information comes from wave function collapse or loss of interference—it’s the only way to get it. So we must be sharing our knowledge and experience through some kind of quantum teleportation or something. Well, actually, I’m just a dilettante when it comes to physics. I don’t know what the real situation is. But there is one thing I can say: ‘I’ decided ‘I’ would advance like light, right?”

Yes, absolutely that was what I’d decided. I’d advance like a ray of light. I’d try all possible paths, find the correct route that got there in the shortest time, and reach my objective, no matter what. I’d thought this path was “determined.” I’d thought this path was correct. But I was wrong. That was all there was to it. I was wrong from the first step—from when I decided my objective. My learning of the truth of Yukari’s death and my revenge on those who caused it were both secondary to my true objective, and having become aware of what that was, this route I’d thought was determined turned out to be just another branch, a possibility destined to disappear.

I thought I’d opened Schrödinger’s box with the cat alive, but I was mistaken: the world wasn’t determined yet. If it wouldn’t lead to the solution, I didn’t need this world.

“Okay. *That’s how I go.*”

I never had a choice in the first place.

I hung up and cast my eyes on my bed, staring at Alice’s sleeping face for a while. I quietly brought my face close to hers, softly dropping a kiss on her eyelid.

I’m sorry. And thank you, Alice. I love you, but I have to advance.
So...

“Goodbye.”

“And with that...

“...you can handle the rest, can't you?”

“Yes. Leave it to me.”

I ended the call and rubbed my eyes, but the tears still wouldn't stop. Grief and joy mixed and alternated between one another as the tears flowed without end. I had no idea what was going on anymore. I quietly examined the room.

My room.

Not my dorm room at Jaunt in America—my bedroom in Japan.

I restrained my racing heart and looked at the clock on my desk. I couldn't believe it, so I turned on the TV to find a news broadcast. My face reflected in the dark TV screen felt off to me. I looked for a mirror and saw myself looking a little younger. And the date shown on the TV news was—I'd never forget it—the date of that night when I first received a call from “me.” The night before I would say the words that drove Yukari to her decision.

Of course, if I didn't change the past from this date, it would be impossible to save Yukari. That was why I'd erased all other possibilities—all other worlds.

Ideally, rather than return to the past, I would have liked to switch places with a “me” in a world in which Yukari was already saved, but I guess that was asking for too much (and frankly, I couldn't even imagine it), but that's neither here nor there.

“I'm back...”

I bet the phone call I got then was from a future me. At the time, this ability was new to me. I had no knowledge or experience and didn't understand anything. However, that wasn't me anymore. Now I shared the knowledge and experience of all the worlds.

I can do it now.

It was too much for me to handle. I dove into my bed and buried

my face in my pillow. I rubbed my face on the tear-stained pillow and screamed into it.

In this world, Yukari is still alive.

And I can save her.

This time, I would not mess up.

The next morning, I left early to meet Yukari at her house. Seeing her for the first time in a while, a long while, a myriad of worlds' worth of a while, I uncontrollably held her tight. I couldn't stop myself.

Then we went to school together. I faced Alice (and honestly, seeing her shook me, for now I had the memory of hating her, the memory of loving her, the memory of supporting her, of killing her, everything; whether or not it felt real now, there was no way I could be calm) and I told her outright that I would never let Yukari go.

For Yukari's sake? To protect her? Those words that had once reverberated with me now rang so hollow.

I didn't listen to anything Alice said. I got promoted from a nobody to a super-nobody—which I'm not sure makes sense as a word—and I didn't care, not at all. I denounced Jaunt as a terrorist training organization and treated Alice as a pitiful little girl. I refused to leave Yukari's side. I growled at interlopers like an animal and even drove teachers away. It seemed that after experiencing so many worlds, I'd developed a certain presence. All day I showed everyone what a beast I could be and colossally wrecked the cool-as-a-cucumber image of Hatou Manabu that had existed until then. I didn't care about any of that anyway—not with Yukari finally here next to me. Because now I could hold her.

And this time, I would protect Yukari without fail.

Alice stayed in our class to the end of the third and final term, at which point she returned to Jaunt in low spirits. Yukari became a third-year, staying at the same school—with me. I'd chased away Alice, gotten rid of Jaunt's interference, and protected Yukari.

It wasn't even half a year later that someone abducted Yukari.

By the time I found her, her body had already gone cold.

Chapter 10: Possibility and Fate

“**W**_{HY},” I asked, “can’t I be like light?”

“Huh?”

“I’m nothing like light, am I? It doesn’t go through a process of trial and error like I do. Light travels all paths simultaneously. All the wrong paths interfere and disappear by themselves, leaving only the correct route connecting two points in the shortest time. In a single moment, only the solution remains. There’s no calculation or anything about it. So why can’t I be like that? There’s no way I could ever get to the right answer trying innumerable possibilities in innumerable worlds one by one, unless I’m a quantum computer!”

“You have a point. It’s true I’m not light, but I am sort of a quantum computer. So I’m pretty sure eventually...”

“Yes, I *am* a quantum computer! With the properties of quanta, infinite ‘mes’ in infinite worlds can cogitate and calculate together! My brain’s a friggin’ quantum computer! So why? Why can’t I pick out the answer I should be able to find in a moment? I know where it is, and yet—”

“I think that’s the *problem*,” “I” whispered with a sense of resignation. “If I knew the question, I could deduce the answer. But ‘I’ don’t know the actual question. So I can’t find the answer. I don’t know what I’m supposed to answer. I don’t know the problem. See, saving Yukari is the goal, not the answer. If I don’t know the question, there’s no way I could come up with the answer.”

“I don’t know the problem I’m trying to solve...”

I knew there *was* a problem. I felt I had something wrong. But I didn’t know what it was. I couldn’t figure it out.

I tried my best at everything I could.

I spent my time at school with her, and I even traveled with her to and from school. Sometimes I even spent the night with her. None of it stopped Yukari from being abducted. No matter how many parallel world versions of myself I had on my side, no matter how many worlds I visited and gathered knowledge and experience in, I was still just a junior high school kid. I had neither power nor time.

With time, I'd have been able to crush Jaunt. But Yukari was always abducted and killed before I could accomplish that.

I tried every method I could. I told Yukari's parents someone was after her and got them to install high-level security. But she was abducted anyway. I got her a bodyguard—but she was killed anyway. I told the media about Yukari's power and made her famous worldwide. All it did was to hurt Yukari and anger Nanami, and Yukari died anyway.

Even when I publicized what I knew about Jaunt to force an investigation, someone abducted Yukari and dissected her anyway. No matter how fast I rushed, no matter how much I prepared, every time I tried some tactic, as if to laugh at my efforts, Yukari was killed, and her brain was stolen anyway. It was like a game. Okay, here's my turn. Now it's Jaunt's turn. There, I lost.

The penalty was Yukari's death—the price of my powerlessness.

Right now, Yukari was with me, alive and well. Yet I couldn't save her. I just couldn't save her. She'd be killed. She'd be killed and I couldn't do *anything* about it. She'd be killed as I failed to make it in time. She'd be killed even though I knew about it beforehand.

She'd be killed, implacably forever.

She'd be killed again and again, while I failed to protect her. It was my fault. Trial and error, forever, trial and error, forever, trial and error, forever...

Oh, gods above, please, save me from this living hell.

I tried killing Alice.

I was arrested and sent to a correctional institution. Looks like I

didn't need that world. I came back and killed Alice. I thought I pulled it off, but I got caught again. So I didn't need that one either. I killed Alice a third time, which is when I finally realized why I'd done it. Yukari had died because Alice had come here to Japan. The solution was simple: destroy Alice.

Destroy her completely.

I pulled it off, but another Alice arrived. I destroyed her replacement, but I got caught again. Trial and error. Trial and error. I'd just keep it up until I was successful.

Eventually, no one came anymore. This time, I thought, Yukari might not die.

How naive of me. Yukari was abducted; I was killed.

Trial and error. Let's start from the beginning...

Sometimes I complained to "me."

"Maybe it's not possible to save Yukari. Maybe fate exists."

"Fate?"

"Yes, precisely. Did you know everything started from Yukari's death? The way I am now started from there. It's because Yukari died that I exist as I am. If Yukari had *lived*, I wouldn't be here, so...maybe it is possible to turn back time. Maybe it is possible to change the past and the future. On the other hand, maybe fate is real. Maybe once it's observed, it can't be changed no matter what you do. So if Yukari's death is 'determined' and 'I' was generated from it, maybe 'I' can't—maybe it's impossible to save her as long as 'I' exist..."

"Yeah. That could be true, but what if it's not? We don't really know. But there's one thing I can say: I don't need a 'me' who gives up as easily as you do. Go ahead and disappear."

I ended the call with a sigh.

Let's try this again. From the beginning. Like a beam of light, let's charge through every route. For the sake of the one solution. Because by now, that's how I go.

One day I suddenly realized, if I didn't have time, I could make it so I did. I didn't have enough time because I was starting from here—from the time I got the first call. All I had to do was start from an earlier point in time. I'd been able to go back in time before, so it should be possible to do it again. *Yes, that's what I should do. I might as well go back before Jaunt was created.*

I'd used my memories from parallel worlds to study up on Jaunt. It hadn't been that long since it was founded. The organization was actually younger than I was. It was tough because it was an organization, which would be fine if they never formalized into an organization with power. If I started from before Jaunt existed, I'd be able to take my time saving Yukari, and my enemy would be weak. This was exactly what was meant by “two birds with one stone.”

“Wait a minute. You want to go further into the past—and have ‘me’ fight them as a little kid?”

“My age doesn't matter. I'll still have ‘our’ knowledge and experience. So no worries. It will actually be a big advantage to be a little kid, because it'll catch the enemy off guard.”

“But if you're planning to go back that far—I mean, I hadn't even met Yukari yet, and my left hand was still normal!”

“What am I hearing from you?” I cackled. “I” still didn't know what “I” was. “Don't you realize? This cell phone is nothing more than a trigger. By this point I'm just using it because it's convenient. I don't really need it anymore. It's already the case that *that's how I go*. I've long since ‘determined’ myself as this. The only important thing is the result. The process can be interpreted however you want. Or do you have something else you need to do?”

A pause.

“No.”

“Then stop your bitchin' and try it, okay? We gotta try every single possible method available—”

I hung up and called again. Repeated use of my cell phone would consume my energy, but that didn't matter. Plus, I didn't need this

world anymore. All I needed was the possibility of saving her. *By now, I didn't even need myself.*

“And with that...”

“...you can handle the rest, can't you?”

“Leave it to me.”

I sighed dramatically and hung up the toy phone. I was startled when the phone I thought was just a toy rang, but what did you expect? I was barely five now. It wouldn't be surprising if a little thing startled me enough that I'd wet myself.

But still...

“It doesn't matter how much knowledge and experience you have if you can't use them well. Maybe it's true that when you get old you get set in your ways.”

I turned my head and thought back to my fourteen-year-old self. Then I thought about my sixteen-year-old self before that. Then I recalled my earlier twenty-year-old self (twenty?), my thirty-year-old self (thirty, wow!), my older selves in distant worlds that now exceed my imagination—all the “mes” in all the worlds.

Pathetic.

“Be flexible, ‘me!’”

“My” failing was that “I'd” only sought possibilities *vertically*. On my own “I'd” tethered the infinity of parallel worlds. But I wouldn't make the same mistake. I wouldn't put limits on possibility.

What I needed was adaptability.

The important thing was the result. As long as the results were determined, the process would come by itself.

Giddy, I pushed the toy phone's buttons. “Hello?”

“Yeah! Hello!” “I” answered immediately.

“You know what to do, right? What’s in my head is in yours now, right?”

“Yeah! I have to find myself in a parallel world! Unfortunately I’m not the one. But I’ll do my best!”

“Okay,” I nodded. I hung up and called again.

Probably at this moment infinite “mes” were making calls all at once. My heart raced to think of it. We’d find her in no time.

Yes, we just had to find *her*. If I was powerless, I just had to find a “me” who had power. Like a “me” with magic.

If the parallel worlds were infinite, there had to be at least one “me” who could use magic. And if we just managed to find one, that would be the foundation for everything after. *That’s how you ought to use infinite possibilities.*

“Hello!”

“Yeah! Leave it to me! I’m sure I can do it!”

That’s right, *I* could do it. After all, I’d always wanted to be a magical girl.

Why magic?

You could call it superpowers instead. The reasoning and process didn’t matter. It could be a mutation, some kind of genetic damage from an external factor, or whatever. There were infinite possibilities, and the important thing was the results.

The first thing was to find a “me” who suspected she could use magic. As soon as I found her, all the “mes” were like that. Next I looked for a “me” who could actually do something. As soon as I found her, all the “mes” were like that.

Logic? Understanding? That didn’t matter.

Who needed that when the results led to the process? Whether it was the Copenhagen interpretation or the Many-worlds interpretation,

the results were the same in the end. Whatever was convenient and useful would be adopted. (In physics, the Copenhagen interpretation was dominant just because it was more convenient than the many-worlds interpretation.) So I had to think flexibly. I had to just look for the results with innocence.

The next thing was to find a version with a useful power. Through repeated tries, I'd gain practice with its implementation. I had to find it first, but I had so many worlds and so much time, who cared? It would be fine. I would definitely get there eventually.

I got caught emitting fire and taken to the hospital.

I teleported into a wall and died.

I got spotted flying and taken into custody by the Self-Defense Force or something like that.

I needed a costume so that no one would catch me and so that I'd be fine even if someone did. I utilized my experience of all the worlds, exploited every possibility until...

“Here I am: Magical Girl Magical Multiple Mana-chan!”

Carrying with her a fervent hope to meet and make friends with Yukari as soon as possible, Magical Multiple Mana-chan sprang into action.

To tell the truth, in some worlds, I couldn't hold back and went straight to Yukari. (What's with that judgmental look? Let me repeat, I was five. I couldn't help but be true to my desires.) But the result of that was that no matter what I did, it would just cause trouble for Yukari and Nanami. They'd get taken hostage or caught in the crossfire or whatever. So, unhappily, I gave up on meeting them at this time. I decided to meet them once everything was finished. If I could just get everything over and done with, I wouldn't have to worry about anything. We could be friends without holding back.

I had to wrap things up—and fast.

“I have no mercy for evildoers!”

Jaunt was a powerful organization, but even a lion or an elephant was powerless as a child. It was just like taking candy from a baby.

I went around defeating the people who would later be Jaunt's founders, the ones with the initials of JAUNT. I also carefully took care of Jaunt's future executives. None of them seemed to understand why this was happening to them, and that annoyed me a bit, but what could I do?

I also punished Alice's mother while I was at it—thoroughly. I'd had a lot of things I wanted to say to her.

Alice, of course, went into an institution. A proper one that looked good; a trustworthy institution, not like Jaunt. I probably wouldn't meet Alice in the future this way, but what choice did I have? Oh, right, I could still go see her. It was strange to me how little Alice glared at me as if I were her enemy, but I was satisfied anyway. Now, there would be no Jaunt.

I returned to Japan and retired from being Magical Multiple Mana-chan.

I met Yukari, became friends with her (that's right, in this world, I was childhood friends with Yukari just like Nanami!), went to the same elementary school, got into the same junior high school, and even though I'd already met her, we had the same run-in and kiss in the hall.

The events that resulted in my left hand becoming a cell phone still occurred. (I didn't particularly work to avoid it, so it came as no surprise. By the way, Nanami also still got hurt and had to be fixed with jungle gym parts, but I intervened so that it didn't spoil her relationship with Yukari.)

And I became a third-year in junior high school.

And Jaunt never showed up.

Even so, Yukari was abducted by some organization other than Jaunt with a completely different location and membership.

Back to the drawing board.

I kept living like that for a while, researched what I had to about

this new organization, and returned to the past. This time, I crushed that organization as well as Jaunt.

Yet another organization appeared and abducted Yukari.
Back to the drawing board.

I don't believe in fate.

I didn't die.

I couldn't die. That was how I went. Even if I died, "I" took over right away. And no matter what, "I" never lost sight of my mission.

So what? There were still more things I could do. There were infinite worlds, infinite possibilities. There was an endless supply of things I could do.

More. More. More. More.

However much it took.

Trial and error.

"Hey, I just thought of something. You know what 'I' said earlier..."

Trial and error.

"Oh, about fate or something? Yeah, 'I' was saying that 'I' came into existence after Yukari died, so there would be a time paradox if 'I' were to save Yukari, so the ending would always be the same."

Trial and error.

"Come to think of it, that kind of makes sense. I *see*. Maybe it's worth giving some thought."

Trial and error.

“Yes, that’s true. It’s not as if we have anything else to do, so maybe it’s worth trying. But how in the world would we do it?”

Trial and error.

Trial and error.

“Beats me. I mean, if we decide we’re gonna do it, we just have to charge ahead like light does, right?”

Trial and error.

Trial and error.

Trial and error.

“Yes, exactly.”

Together we said, “If ‘I’ can’t do it, I just have to not be ‘me.’”

Chapter 11: The Answer and “I”

IT WAS EASY to stop being me.

If you want logic, I’ll come up with some. If you need a process, I’ll devise one.

First I tried being my mother. My mother was not technically me, but she had half my genes, so you could say she was half “me.” So if I could just believe that I could become “me,” that was enough. As long as I kept my thinking flexible, it was feasible for the infinite “mes” with infinite possibilities in infinite parallel worlds. “I” could do anything—apart from saving Yukari.

So I stopped being “me” and became my mother. I even tried being my father while I was at it. Once I’d done it once, the rest was simple. I tried being my grandfather. I tried being my grandmother. I tried being my great-grandfather. I tried being my great-grandmother. I followed the roots all the way up and then came back down. I became my teacher at school. It turned out we were distantly related.

Even Nanami and I shared an ancestor in the remote past. So I became Nanami too. Yes, the further I went back, the more people I could become—at the cost of losing my sense of time, of losing what you would call sanity. Still, I’d lived as so many different people. Of course, I might have lost things in the process, but if so, I wasn’t aware of it.

There were some problems. (You probably realize this by now, but I am by no means omnipotent.) Unfortunately, when I became my mother, my father, or someone else like Nanami—perhaps because it wasn’t totally me, but a “me” that had been divided in half, and then half again, and then half again—the sharing of knowledge and experience didn’t go as well.

How do I put it? All the memories I was left with were those of externally observable objective facts. I knew what my mother, my father, or Nanami did when, but I didn’t receive any information at all about what was going on inside them, like what was running through their heads. And I didn’t know why, but there were some people I

should have been able to become but couldn't.

Whatever—I didn't dwell on those details. The important thing was not to totally become Nanami, nor to become every person in the world, but to deny "myself" and become someone other than "me."

I tried protecting Yukari as Nanami. Yukari was still killed.

All right, time for some more trial and error.

I tried being my teacher, I tried being my parents, I tried being a total stranger, and still I couldn't save Yukari. I tried being the prime minister, I tried being the police, I tried being Kasoku with his drills, and still I couldn't save Yukari. No matter who I became, I couldn't save her. I was at my limits, yet it was never enough.

Do you know the Mother Goose rhyme that goes like this? "Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall, Humpty Dumpty had a great fall, all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty together again."

Not a single person could save Yukari.

As Nanami, I looked at "Hatou Manabu" from Nanami's eyes. Not "me" at the other end of the phone, but the real, living, moving "Hatou Manabu." The real "me" who was born from my parents but wasn't me. It was funny—or maybe obvious—but even when I was someone else, Hatou Manabu went on existing. And "Hatou Manabu" and "I" couldn't share our knowledge. We were completely separate entities. I was Nanami and "Hatou Manabu" was in front of me, talking happily to Yukari. But she didn't know that you couldn't put Humpty together again.

Suddenly thinking of it, I tried killing "Hatou Manabu" in one world.

It didn't particularly change anything.

In another world I tried threatening "Hatou Manabu" so she'd stop being friends with Yukari. It still didn't change anything. It seemed, in the end, "Hatou Manabu" wasn't an important factor.

Oh, I also tried being Yukari's mother.

When you got down to it, people were after Yukari because they knew about her purple eyes. It seemed to me that I should control things so that people didn't know about them. It seemed like a great idea. I stuck like glue to Yukari, never having her brother or sister, not minding my husband, just focusing on Yukari. I warned her sternly not to let anyone catch on to the way she saw things, and I trained her in proper behavior so that her actions wouldn't give it away.

I suppose to an outside observer, the way I did it might have seemed cruel, but Yukari's life depended on it, so I steeled my heart and forced Yukari to keep the fact that living things looked like robots to her an absolute secret from everyone. I didn't give in to crying or shouting. I didn't overlook the slightest transgressions. I made her swear up and down not to repeat her mistakes. At the same time, I showed her plenty of love so that she wouldn't mistake my intent. After I berated her sufficiently that she'd never forget it and made sure her body remembered too, I hugged her. When Yukari did well, I lavished her with praise. I constantly poured my whole heart and soul into conveying to her that I wasn't doing this out of hatred, but out of love, out of a pure desire to protect her.

That's right. I wasn't like Alice's mother. I wasn't doing this out of narcissism, but out of genuine care for Marii Yukari.

My teaching was so effective that even Yukari's father didn't find out how things looked to her. The price was that Yukari didn't become friends with Hatou Manabu or Nanami—or anyone at all, in fact, but that was all right with me. The important thing was to protect Yukari at all costs. I had to be sure that no one other than me found out about the way things seemed in her purple eyes. She didn't need any friends who would put her life in danger—for now, at least—and anyway, she had to grin and bear it to get through her last year of junior high.

But Yukari never made it into her third year of junior high.

She never even made it into junior high. On the day of her entrance ceremony, she was hit by a car and died. According to witness testimony, Yukari had wobbled into the line of traffic as if she had intended to do so.

Someone tell me: where did I go wrong?

In the course of crossing countless worlds, sometimes as “me” and sometimes as “others,” it gradually dawned on me. I felt as if I’d grasped my error.

In the end, could it be that Yukari’s death was an entirely separate matter from Jaunt or me? Could it be that the world itself was Yukari’s—and was *my*—enemy? You could call it fate if you wanted. In any case, was there something in the world that willed Yukari’s death? The death of whom the world looked upon differently from the vast majority? Was it that something that was getting in my way?

I saw it. My fundamental mistake had been assuming that I was the sole person who could determine reality. Now that I thought about it, if I could, others should be able to too. At the beginning, at least, I was a normal human being—a nobody. If we went with the Copenhagen interpretation, no matter how much I might determine the results of the world in which Yukari lived, I wasn’t the only one observing it. Everyone living in the world had to be observing it, just as I was. If it was the consensus of the majority that determined the world, then no matter how limitless my possibilities might be, I was still the minority; And Yukari, who saw humans as robots, was a foreign object that normal people sought to eliminate, perhaps. The way they did certain geniuses, as described by Alice.

Was the consensus of the world recognizing Yukari as a foreign object and determining her elimination? Was that why my attempts to prevent it were futile?

Yes, I might open the box with the cat in it, but if I too was in a box, I’d just think I determined the life of the cat, whereas the one who imprisoned me could open my box and observe me, overturning the result I thought was determined. No matter what I did, someone else would redetermine it.

Was that the situation I was in?

What I needed was knowledge—and perspective. I needed to know just what I had to observe. And just what was observing me.

I refused to believe in fate. If I was trapped in a box, I would escape.

Yes. Now I finally saw what the question was. And in that case, I only had to move like light toward the answer.

Watch me—I would *win*.

Chapter 12: The Future and the Anthropic Principle

IF IT'S NOT DETERMINED whether the cat is dead or alive until you open the box and observe it, then how does the cat feel? Is it aware that it's alive and dead at the same time?

No, how could it know?

There's no way the cat would think it was alive or dead or both, and the same goes for us. To us, our bodies feel like unshakable, immutable fact. Why? Because our brains are incapable of perceiving any other state.

Told that we're made of clouds of probability called quanta—particles and waves at the same time—there's no way we can just swallow it and say, “Oh, I see.” If someone tells us, “No, your body is not determinate; you just think it is,” it's difficult to form a counterargument. If they say it's just that our brains perceive it that way, we're left with no way to disprove it. After all, when it comes down to it, it is our brains that receive and process everything for us.

What if someone tells us we're sleeping and having an extremely realistic dream? They say, “You're just a brain in a tank mistaking a virtual world generated by electrical impulses inside you for reality.” How do you disprove that? So what we have to rely on in the end is “I think, therefore I am.”

Have you heard of the cosmological theory called the Anthropic principle? In simple terms, it's the idea that the universe exists for the sake of humans. From a common-sense standpoint, it sounds ludicrous, but there are plenty of scientists contemplating it seriously. That just goes to show how convenient the parameters of the universe are for humans. They say if the balance of these parameters had been even a little different, humans would never have existed.

The birth of humanity was necessary for the universe? The universe exists in the form it does for the sake of it? These kinds of ideas are called the anthropic principle. I understand what's amazing about this field is that the more it's researched, the more results turn up that seem to make such conclusions obvious.

What I say only goes so far, but apparently, there are scientists who make some pretty bold claims along these lines in quantum mechanics. They say that the laws of the universe are what they are because of human observation. They say that the universe was determined in a form favorable to humanity *because* humans observed it. In other words, it's not that the universe was always such that one and one make two—it's just that way because humans observed it that way, because it's convenient for human observers. The universe became that way because of the observation. The results of future observation affect the past, and the result of that is the present.

Again, what I say only goes so far, but I think the principle is pretty wild.

This might be arrogant of me—like, I might be taking it in a distorted way—but it's a convenient line of thought. So, let me set aside personal thoughts and embrace this line of thinking with enthusiasm. Let me affirm it and join the club. Three cheers for the anthropic principle!

“I think, therefore I am.”

When all is said and done, convenience is what we're all about.

I was born as Hatou Manabu again, and I let the world run its course. I entered junior high and met Yukari with a kiss in the hall. I got to know Nanami, was kidnapped by a serial killer, and gained a cell phone in my hand. On the first day of the second term of my second year, Alice joined as an exchange student. Yukari went to America and died.

After I graduated junior high (and by the way, in the meantime I got with Kasoku Tomonori before Nanami did—yeah, sorry, I guess that was pretty mean of me, but come on, let me have a little fun as a treat), I joined Jaunt.

I investigated the truth behind Yukari's death. On the way, I made up with Alice and established an even deeper relationship. Yes, I got her both to cooperate with me and to depend on me. I brainwashed her to love me and see me as her everything. It was easy for me, already knowing everything about Alice, and even if I'd failed, I still had infinite possibilities to try again. After tricking Alice, I pretended to follow Jaunt and polished my skills.

I waited for the right time. Then, along with Alice, I exposed the corruption behind Jaunt, drained the swamp, purified the organization, and ultimately made it mine.

I stood at its peak.

I turned Jaunt into an upright organization and worked proactively to protect and nurture geniuses. Meanwhile, I went on expanding my influence. Naturally, this required vast sums of capital. No matter how much cash I had, it was never enough. I started a corporation and made it a success. Among the infinite parallel worlds, there were plenty in which I got filthy rich. I started a foundation, searched even wider for talent, gathered scientists, and supported promising businesses. Putting growth before profit, I invested all of my personal assets.

Jaunt was a symbol of the dynamism that would propel the future. It was an icon of innovation. And by now, I, Hatou Manabu, was Jaunt.

I was never afraid to put down my money for scientific development. It was worth it for the achievement of a paradigm shift.

I went around the world scouting people with talent. I didn't use any underhanded methods, nor did I need to. Opportunity routinely knocked at my door, and fortune followed it with blessings. They called me the goddess of victory, the sponsor of the twenty-first century. I made it into the "Working Women's Top 100" and onto the front of *Times*. Organizers all over the world invited me to give talks.

And through it all, Alice and the other young genius scientists gathered at Jaunt continued their research. I sent my support to geniuses in physics, in biology, in every field. Sociology, art, music, literature. I never stopped working to develop whatever might further my ends.

But despite all that, the key was still Alice, and that was why I'd do anything for her.

Anything but *free* her.

Social interaction was a difficult game, but I always won.

“Hey, Alice. Is there anything I can do for you?” By this time, I could speak four languages, but I still spoke to Alice in Japanese.

Alice had returned to her natural hair color as an adult. She replied to me blankly, “Leave me alone. Ignore anything I say. Don’t respond to me.”

I laughed and shook my head. My words cut to the point. “I can’t do that. What I can do is love you from the bottom of my heart, or I can hate you from the bottom of my heart, but I can’t be in the middle. I’m like light. Of all the possible routes, I can only take the most extreme and the most direct. I can only pick the maximum or the minimum. That’s how I go.”

Alice pointed a gun at me, so I smiled, averted my gaze so as to be easier for her to shoot me, and pointed to my forehead. It wasn’t the first time this had happened. Trial and error—rinse and repeat.

“Try and do it in one shot if you can. You can come closer.”

“You think I can’t do it?”

“No. You probably don’t know what I’m talking about, but I already know you can do it. I know for a fact. You wouldn’t have any way of knowing this, but this isn’t the first time you’ve killed me, nor would it be the first time the other way around.”

“I really don’t know what you’re talking about, Manabu.”

“That’s fine. Just understand this: in this world, I love you. So if it’s what you want, I don’t mind. I’ll give this world to you, gladly.”

“That’s not what I want!”

“Yes. I know that too.”

It took a while. Then I heard her sobbing. I looked up and saw Alice weeping.

That was how it always was. Alice always hesitated. She was such a sweet girl.

Softly, I sighed. “Come on, Alice. There’s nothing more I can give you. So please—just shoot me. I don’t think this world will work anyway. If it’s going to be like this, I want you to be the one.”

“I...I...I...”

“If you love me, Alice, show it. Prove it with your actions. Make me yours. If you don’t, you’ll never be free from me.”

Love and hatred—always the extremes. I branded them on myself like tattoos.

That’s how I go.

“Let me end this world by dying for you, Alice.”

I went back through my memories, searching for where I went wrong, summing things up, breaking them down. It was a shame, but if this was the end of the line, then so be it. I’d do better in the next world.

Bang!

Alice finished it in the year of my forty-seventh birthday—the year I was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize for my global patronage. With all of the chutzpah of a genius, Alice barged into my room before dawn, grabbed me, and smooched me on the cheek, and said just two words: “It’s done.”

I held my breath as she carried in a large canvas. I beheld the abstract image displayed in front of me.

“This is a picture of a theory of everything...”

It was what I had been pursuing all along as I crossed countless worlds and funded so many geniuses. One of the final goals of physics was to describe all four of the fundamental forces of the universe—the strong force, the weak force, the electromagnetic force, and gravity—in one system.

Of course, achieving this wouldn’t mean we were at the finish line. Completing a theory of everything wouldn’t mean that tomorrow we’d suddenly be able to predict the future, live forever, or travel

between the stars. Nonetheless, it would be an indication that humans' efforts in science hadn't been in vain, that the things we could only hypothesize about due to limited observation—such as the beginning of the universe and the behavior of quanta—were valid.

It would be a perspective for certain observation. A fundamental index.

“Well, I still have to translate this into mathematical notation, though. But at this point, it's pretty much done. Manabu, I should have it ready by the time you accept your prize. Look forward to—”

I shook my head and interrupted her. “Don't worry about it, Alice. This is enough. I see it. I *see* it. This is it. This is what I was looking for.”

Yes, I saw it.

I couldn't interpret equations in terms of pictures. I wasn't even gifted with equations in the first place. But somehow through this picture alone, I understood. Intuitively, it made sense to me. I saw that I'd learned what I wanted to know.

“Manabu...?”

“I understand now. *This* is where the story begins.”

Numbers glowed faintly on my left hand. It was the screen of my cell phone, long unused, now glowing despite Alice's presence. Seeing that, it hit me: *Oh, our world has just been observed. Now the universe is going to collapse.* And I came at last to understand that which I had long known but had never really understood.

The universe still hadn't been determined.

Until now, the universe had not undergone wave function collapse (or loss of interference with the many worlds). Like a cat in a box inside a box inside a box inside a box, we'd never realized we were in the middle of that system, while all along the world was still just a cloud of probability. We didn't know it, but all along our existence was probabilistic.

Because humans didn't know what to observe.

But now I knew. Through the index of the theory of everything, I knew what we had to observe.

Henceforth the past would be determined and the future created. The *beginning* which was only a probability would now collapse into

reality. All the time until now would turn into imaginary time and would tunnel. The universe would collapse into a single point, turn into infinite points, and all at once abruptly expand...

Of course, this wasn't the "ultimate answer." Someday, further features would be integrated into the theory of everything. The next theory would likely unravel the mystery of consciousness. And when that happened, the universe would collapse yet again.

A repetition of the Big Bang, though it wouldn't be the last time. Again and again and again and again—the trial and error would never end. An eternal game of cat and mouse. The Ouroboros devouring its tail.

It was enough for me, though.

"What? What is that? That light in your left hand... Manabu?"

I softly placed my left hand over my ear and my right hand on Alice's cheek. In that position I drew Alice to me and kissed the eyelid over her honey-colored eye.

Thank you, Alice. I'm grateful. Let's meet in the world back the way it was when the universe completes its cycle. Though I suppose you won't be able to find me anywhere in the universe by then...

"Manabu...?"

"Goodbye."

And so my aim was accomplished. "My" objective of erasing my existence.

Yes. At last, I disappeared from the world and ceased to exist.

Chapter 13: Yukari

LET ME TELL YOU about a girl named Marii Yukari.

She was in her second year of junior high. At a glance she appeared to be an ordinary girl, but she had purple eyes which, according to her, saw people—in fact, all living things—as robots. (To be clear, it was only her irises that were purple. Apart from that, her eyes were physically just like anyone else's.)

As a result, from the time she was a child, she was isolated. Therefore, any friend she made she adored and cherished. Indeed, Marii wasn't normal, but she did have friends. First of all, she had a friend named Tenjou Nanami, a girl who taught her how to smile.

At the present, Tenjou wasn't as close to Marii as she had been, but Marii still considered her a friend.

Second, there was Hatou Manabu. Hatou easily accepted Marii's purple eyes, and even Marii's repair of her body. It was hard to find a friend like her, and it was thanks to her that Marii found the courage to seek another friend without holding back.

Third, there was Alice Foyle. She was a child genius with a different kind of unusual perspective than Marii. She pronounced Marii a kindred soul and a natural ally. That didn't mean that she had the same eyes as Marii, but all the same, it was music to Marii's ears to be accepted.

So Marii decided to change schools.

She was sad to leave Hatou and Tenjou, but they themselves reassured her that it was for the best.

There was more to it than that; Marii herself was conflicted. She wondered whether, by staying, she would create an undue imposition on Hatou and Tenjou. She wondered whether they would end up in trouble again because of her eyes, as they had before. She wondered whether it would be inexcusable for her to stay with them.

Maybe it's no good like this. Maybe I need the strength to strive on my own.

Hatou said she would wait, which helped Marii make up her mind.

She summoned all her courage.

If I want friends, I have to reach out myself. I have to become stronger, the girl thought.

Marii trusted Alice Foyle and Alice Foyle's friends, and she crossed the ocean to America, where Jaunt was.

Foyle and her friends were kind: Marii thought she could be friends with them. However, the adults were not as considerate. From the beginning, the adults wanted Marii's eyes for themselves. They had always meant to exploit Marii's eyes. That was why they had deceived Foyle and sent her to Japan, to scout Marii.

They told Marii, "We want you to use your purple eyes for the good of the world. We want you to look at Earth with those eyes. And if possible, we want you to rebuild Earth the way you must have rebuilt Tenjou Nanami and Hatou Manabu."

Marii refused: she said she couldn't do that to Earth when there was nothing wrong with it. Yet the adults tried to persuade Marii. They said Earth was an organism on the verge of demise (with which Marii disagreed). They said Earth needed humans to manage its mechanisms directly (with which Marii also disagreed).

Marii refused them so stubbornly that they isolated her in a separate building of the research facility. They cut her off from Foyle and the rest, threatening her they'd harm her. They never did follow through for some reason; they were serious, but somehow they didn't hurt her.

When they threatened to kill her family, Marii began to lose her humanity. She behaved like the robots she saw, not responding when spoken to, and eventually, not even eating. The adults of Jaunt gave up and changed their plan. If Marii wouldn't cooperate, they'd investigate the secret of her eyes themselves.

To tell the truth, they hadn't expected all that much of Marii's cooperation. They didn't doubt the way she said she saw things, but the question was what could be done with her eyes. Unlike Tenjou and Hatou, they'd never had the chance to be impressed by it firsthand. (They still hadn't dug up the details of what had happened to Tenjou and Hatou.) To them, the unknown potential of Marii's eyes was less

interesting than a possible biochemical explanation of qualia.

There was also another factor of which the children had no idea—to wit, that Jaunt was a money-guzzling machine that depended desperately on federal funding and budgets and other such vices of the real world. They needed immediate results, not some uncertain possibilities the eye couldn't see.

They needed concrete bargaining chips in the here and now.

Physically, there was nothing odd about Marii's eyes. Therefore, the secret of Marii's power could only lie in that most mysterious of human organs: the brain. If they studied her brain, it might give a hint as to what qualia were, a field in which just about no ground had ever been broken. As of now, Marii was all but a vegetable and of no use whatsoever. Even worse, she was clogging up the system.

"Then why don't we...?" began the suggestion. And so they decided to subject Marii to a battery of inhumane experiments.

That very day, the FBI burst in and arrested the adults of Jaunt.

A certain employee had leaked the plans. (To be precise, the employee had informed Foyle and her friends about what was happening to Marii, and they had reported it. But due to various circumstances, this is not part of the record. The identity of the employee likewise lies shrouded in mystery.)

In the end, Marii Yukari was rescued.

Now she is in the hospital on an IV. Her health had reached a critical state due to malnutrition she suffered. She is stable now, in life support terms, but she still hasn't spoken a single word. However, there's no need to worry. Her family and friends are on their way from Japan. Hatou Manabu is coming, and so is Tenjou Nanami, despite her intransigence.

Alice Foyle and friends are asleep in the next room, having worried endlessly over Marii. They refused to leave, and here they still are.

Marii has family and friends. People who cherish her. She will likely be fine.

Marii will certainly get back on her feet.

There will still be dangers ahead. There will still be suffering. Nonetheless, she will surely overcome it. She will definitely find happiness.

Marii Yukari will still be able to live on happily as ever...

Look, her eyes are opening...

Marii opened her eyes.

She looked around, and then her eyes dropped to the toy robot at her side. Foyle had brought it. It was one of those “plastic models” Marii was so fond of. Foyle knew that.

Marii stared at it. “Gaku-chan...?”

Marii must not have been quite awake yet. Perhaps there was a dream still dancing on her eyelids. She rubbed her eyes and looked up, at last alert as she held the robot in her hand and looked at it intently.

“Gaku-chan? Gaku-chan, it’s you, isn’t it?”

“I” was so surprised, my heart almost stopped. Though “I” no longer had a heart, it’s true. *No, it couldn’t be*, “I” reminded myself. *That’s right. Marii Yukari depended on Hatou Manabu. It was in large part because of Hatou Manabu’s encouragement that she made up her mind to come here abroad to Jaunt. Now, in her unstable state of mind, she’s started to look for Hatou Manabu. That’s all there is to it. She couldn’t have seen “me.”*

After all, “I” didn’t exist.

“I” could no longer be observed by anyone. The theory of everything that Alice discovered could be called an index of observation. From the opposite angle, it showed the limits of human observation. “I” grasped it, used it, and leaped over the limits.

“I” went over ten billion years into the past, fiddled with my own parameters, and remade myself into a being to whom the theory of

everything did not apply. “I” re-evolved and became a being beyond human perception, without a body, neither wave nor particle, nor even probability, a nonexistent entity measurable nowhere in space by human beings.

“I” erased myself from the observable universe.

All so no one could observe “me.”

Therefore, there was no longer anyone in this world who could perceive “me.” And thus, there was no one who could determine “me.” So I could be sure now that no one would come between “me” and protecting Marii Yukari. Now “I” wouldn’t let anyone kill Marii.

“Gaku-chan...? Why won’t you answer me? Are you mad at me? Is it because I didn’t keep in touch? That’s... I’m sorry. But you see, there was a lot going on, so...”

“I” was no longer a human, no longer had warm blood thrumming in my veins nor tears to shed, and yet seeing Marii about to cry, “I” felt unable to withstand the emotion. So, with great trepidation, “I” spoke. It surprised me that the concept was still with me.

Could it be that you are speaking to “me”?

“Of course! You’re Gaku-chan! Hey! Don’t scare me like that!”

Ah—ah, no. “I” am not Hatou Manabu. Hatou Manabu is heading your way in an airplane right now. “I” am...a hallucination. At the present time, you are mentally unwell. So you’d best get some more sleep.

“Ah! How could you? Don’t be mean! It’s true I see people as robots, so I don’t get expressions very well...and sometimes see things wrong...but I’d never mistake anyone else for you! It’s true you’ve really changed from the Gaku-chan I know—as always you’ve got the ultimate adaptability—but still, however I look at you, you’re Gaku-chan! I can tell! But why...? How...? When did you develop a feature like that?”

For a while, I simply couldn't believe it. *Yukari's purple eyes see "me"? No one should be able to observe "me," no human to whom the theory of everything applies.*

For over ten billion years—only a memory, but still—"I" was alone. No one could see "me" nor speak to "me." "I" was alone, waiting for the day "I" could meet Yukari. It had been like that forever, and "I'd" assumed it would be like that forever. And that was fine, because that was how "I" went.

In all kinds of worlds, "I'd" earned it. I'd trampled over worlds, over possibilities, for the sake of "my" goal. Yes, I'd put my trust in the infinite versions of "myself" and fled from world to world, from possibility to possibility, looking for a world that was convenient to me.

There was no such thing as a world that wasn't needed.

Doubtless I was a sinner deserving of hell. It was only right that I atone for my transgressions. Thus "I'd" been alone all this time, and if I could just protect Yukari for this brief span, I would accept being alone forever. That's what I'd decided. And yet...

"What's wrong, Gaku-chan? What happened...?"

Before I knew it, I was crying. It only took an instant for everything I had built and borne, long, great, and boundless, to come crashing down. The dam had burst and it was too late to stop the flood. I sobbed like a child throwing a temper tantrum, shed nonexistent tears, and the words poured forth. I spoke of my past. How it was my fault that Yukari went to America: my fault that Yukari died. My regret I'd carried forever.

I told her of parallel worlds. Of infinite possibilities.

I told her how I'd found her body and sworn to avenge her. How I'd learned I could change the past and sworn to protect her. How I'd changed the past. How I'd done it again and again, changing the past and failing to protect her and letting her die, changing it and letting her die, changing it and letting her die—killing Alice, killing Nanami, killing Hatou, killing others for my own convenience, killing myself, becoming Nanami, becoming Yukari's mother, advancing like light,

using Alice, consuming countless parallel worlds strictly for my own sake, running away from any that weren't convenient to me, again and again and again and again, repeated in infinite worlds.

I told Marii Yukari everything.

She just listened. She didn't raise questions, but instead, looked on sincerely. She didn't place blame, but sat there quietly, hearing my confession.

"So that 'theory of everything' is what allowed you to transform like that?"

I—I'm not sure I would describe it as "transforming," but—I guess?

After I'd finished telling her everything, I felt lighter, and yet the heart I wasn't supposed to have was fiercely pounding.

Was Yukari repulsed by me? It didn't seem she was afraid, but was she sickened? Was she appalled?

Well, that was fine. I would accept it.

Just to have been able to talk to her was more than I'd dreamed of. I couldn't ask for more. I lived only to protect her, and that was what I'd do.

That was enough.

Anyway, that's how it is, so you don't have to worry about anything, Yukari. I hope...you'll just accept me, my being here for you. I promise I'll protect you. Now no one can get in my way. I have free reign to observe and interfere...

I saw Yukari wince for an instant. She cast her eyes down on the model robot for a while, and then looked up (to be clear, I wasn't the model robot; I didn't actually exist; I was everywhere and nowhere in the room, like a cloud) and opened her mouth.

"Um, Gaku-chan? I don't want to hurt your feelings, but I think friends have to be honest with each other...so I'm going to be, okay? Get ready for what I'm about to say. Um...I hate to say this after you've done all that, and I wish I didn't have to, but...I don't think there's anything you can do to protect me."





She was so matter-of-fact.

Gasping without a throat, “I” rebutted. *What? Wh-why? You’re wrong! It’ll be fine! Now there’s no one who can observe me! Now no one can get in my way!*

“I can. See? I see you clearly.”

Yeah, well...so what if you can, Yukari?

“Don’t you understand, Gaku-chan? Don’t you see the problem? Don’t you see what’s wrong? If I can observe you, then I don’t think you can change my fate.”

What?

“The only one who can change my fate—the only one who should change my fate—is me. Gaku-chan, you don’t have the right to change me.”

I didn’t have eyes, yet I saw everything grow dim. Deep within me, something snapped like a fragile spiderweb and fell apart.

Chapter 14: “Hatou Manabu”

“**I** DON'T KNOW MUCH about quantum theory and things like that...but I think if it's my fate to die, that's the fate I observe for myself. My fate is mine alone, and your fate is yours alone. I think that's how it is.”

People could only observe and determine their own fate? It was only an abstract theory with no scientific evidence, yet somehow it socked me right in the gut. *Oh, I see*, I thought. I'd thought if no one could observe me, no one could get in my way. I'd thought I could protect Yukari. But if Yukari was right: the only one who could change Yukari's fate to die was Yukari herself, and no one had been getting in my way; in fact, everything I'd done had just been an imposition on Yukari.

Yukari's fate belonged to no one but herself. For someone else to try to change it was arrogant blasphemy, yet that was exactly what I'd been trying to do. *Oh, I see*, I thought again, far too late.

So that was what I'd had wrong. I'd been forcing my own desires on her. I'd said it was for Yukari's sake, while ignoring her feelings. I used her as an excuse to impose my own. I was fleeing from my own fate which I ought to have faced: the reality that I couldn't save Yukari, plus the reality of myself and my overwhelming powerlessness.

Oh. I'm such a massive idiot.

Before I went off trying to protect Yukari, so smug and self-righteous, I ought to have told her how I felt. Instead of imposing on her, I ought to have told her: “I'm sorry I'm too weak to protect you. Just like Alice says, I'm a nobody and I don't have any outstanding talents, and the way things are you might end up dead, but still I want to struggle with you, no matter how cold reality is.”

I'm sorry, Yukari. You're absolutely right. I was wrong all along.

“No, I'm sorry! Again, it's my fault. If I hadn't gone and fixed you

with a cell phone, this never would have—”

It's not like that. It's not your fault. There was no other way, and you couldn't have predicted this. In the end, it was my decisions that made things turn out like this. Besides, it's not so bad being the way I am. This "body" can be pretty useful for helping you out. I'll be fine.

I saw it now. I'd gone far, far astray. It was too late to turn back, but—so I'd just—

“That’s not it at all!” Yukari exclaimed. “Gaku-chan, I’m truly grateful you care so much about me, but...it hurts. I can’t stand for you to be deformed like this.” Tears distorted her voice. “I can’t bear to never feel you hugging me again.”

Rushing to reassure her, I said, *Wait, no, remember? Hatou Manabu still exists in this world. So don't—*

“No! That Gaku-chan is Gaku-chan, but you’re Gaku-chan too! Uh... Anyway, even if that Gaku-chan exists, I don’t want you to be like this forever, unable to be seen or to speak to anyone but me. For that to continue forever, even after I die, into eternity—I don’t want that! If you admit your sins, Gaku-chan, I think you’ve already paid the price. I’ll try harder for you, Gaku-chan. I’ll try hard to stand up to my fate so you don’t have to deform yourself like this. So come on, Gaku-chan, let’s go back, okay?”

I smiled—or I would have if I could—and told her, *Thank you, Yukari. I'm grateful you feel that way.*

“Then come on!”

But it's impossible now. I can't go back anymore. I mean...

I don't know how to go back.

Yukari froze momentarily at my words. “How...I mean...can’t you use your cell phone like you did before?” Her voice dripped with unease.

I did my best to answer calmly. *It was "Hatou Manabu" who had the cell phone. The one who insisted, "That's how I go," wasn't me anymore, but "Hatou Manabu." It's true I might have been "Hatou Manabu" once. But now...*

I remembered being an entity called Hatou Manabu once, long, long ago. However, I didn't know what that meant anymore. What was Hatou Manabu? I didn't know how to go back to being that being.

Before I knew it, I'd lost too much of me.

I became my mother. I became Tenjou Nanami. I became your mother, even. With my ability to become anyone, my memories grew too infinite, too countless; they mixed too much, changed too much; and 13.7 billion years of evolution is just too long. I don't know what it means anymore to exist as "Hatou Manabu."

"What, that's all? If that's all you're worried about, there's no problem!"

Yukari's strident pronouncement seized me right there in my sea of memories.

With a smile, she continued: "Oh, yeah, I didn't tell you, huh? Gaku-chan, you're confused. Sorry."

Huh?

"I understand. Okay, let me ask you, you were just talking about how you became so many people, but then why didn't you become me? Did you ever become Alice-chan?"

Huh? Uh, I never managed to become you or Alice...but that's because Alice is a foreigner...

"No, that's not it. I mean, setting Alice-chan aside, you became my mother, but you never became me, right? I'm Japanese, and I'm my mother's child. I thought you could become anyone genetically linked. Doesn't that strike you as odd?"

It did, now that she mentioned it. When I realized I could become other people, of course I did try to become Yukari. I figured that being Yukari might be the best way to protect Yukari. (It seems to stray from the point when you look at it, but at the time I was willing to try anything.) But even though I'd been able to become Yukari's mother, I wasn't able to become her flesh and blood, Yukari. At the time, I just figured that was how it worked and didn't think too hard about it.

Do you know why that is, Yukari?

“Mm-hmm.” Yukari smiled with a hint of melancholy. “Well, I’m guessing, but I think you knew it deep down. You knew you’d never be able to see what I saw. You knew no one would ever be able to see what I saw.”

You mean...

Absolute Parallelism.

Yukari and I could never intersect, could never truly understand each other, but we had to admit that to be friends with each other. That was the fundamental premise of everything. I did know that. I’d admitted it and accepted it.

“Likewise you knew you’d never know how things looked to the genius Alice-chan. So you couldn’t become Alice or me—I mean, you couldn’t *pretend* to be us. You never actually became Ten-chan or my mother. You looked like Ten-chan or my mother, you were in their position, and you thought you were them, but really, you were just Gaku-chan *pretending* to be them. So you never knew what Ten-chan or my mother saw either. No one can really share what they see with others. If you could, I think you’d have become me.”

I just thought I became others? I was still “Hatou Manabu,” even now? And that’s why I couldn’t adopt the identity of Yukari or Alice, because I knew from the start I couldn’t see what they saw?

That would explain why I hadn’t been able to become Yukari or Alice. But—

So what, though? I objected weakly. *Even if you’re right, I still can’t remember who I am!*

Yukari shook her head. “Look, you don’t have to remember! You don’t need any qualifications or anything. You could never be anyone else to begin with. Gaku-chan, you’ve always been Gaku-chan. I can’t be anyone but myself either. I can only see things the way I see them.”

“Yukari...”

“Right? No matter how deformed you might be, you’re still Gaku-chan. You don’t have to agonize yourself over remembering or things like that. Don’t think too hard; you can just feel.” She stopped to think, and then continued with a bashful look. “Gaku-chan? Do you remember when we first met, in the hall of our junior high school?”

Of course. I was walking down the hall, and you suddenly ran into me

and stole my first kiss.

“Oh—oh—Gaku-chan, you’re the one who turned around all of a sudden! It was my first time kissing someone too...” Yukari turned her slightly reddened cheek and looked down at the model robot in her hands. She stared at it. Then she smiled and said, “Gaku-chan? I don’t need some godlike entity that will grant my wishes. What I want is a friend who will pray with me.”

Then she continued on.

“So let’s meet one more time, okay?”

Yukari softly kissed the robot in the palms of her hands. And the feeling I’d once experienced came rushing back to “my” brain I didn’t think I had, “my” body, “my” nonexistent arms.

It came back to life.

I remembered. Yes, that was when we had met. That was when everything started.

What made an impression more than her lips was the feeling of her in my arms. She felt hot. She felt soft. I was panicked yet calm. Feeling the rigid Yukari over my whole body, I wondered what would happen next, how she would react once she regained her senses, and it kind of excited me. Thrilled me. The feeling of a sign of something about to begin overcame me, and I felt as if it was just us in the middle of this vast world.

That was how we met.

Yes, we must have been alone there then. We met miraculously—*improbably*—in this wide world. No matter how many people there may be in the world, no matter how many hugs, no matter how many kisses, that encounter of ours, *that* kiss, belongs to us alone. That feeling when we embraced and looked into each other’s eyes, belongs to me alone, my qualia of purple.

Hatou Manabu’s treasure.

That is how we, Marii Yukari and Hatou Manabu, met.

I see, I thought as I fell through the infinite darkness. When I look at an apple, infinite versions of me look at the apple the same way. The countless “mes” in infinite universes see the same apple and feel the same thing. I think all the versions of myself looking at the apple at the same time resonate in some part of “my” brain, interfere with each other, link their images together in “my” head like a hologram. That’s qualia. Qualia are like strings through the countless overlapping membranes called “me.”

It’s the evidence that no matter how many “mes” there are in the universe, that all of them are the same me. No friend, no matter how close, can share that which only I understand—the proof that I am me.

I have no need to remember. That which I feel is that which only I can feel.

I’m no one else but Hatou Manabu. My qualia must be the proof.

The world was bathed in white light.

Chapter 15: The Light's Destination

I JUMPED IN THE DARKNESS. In a fit of confusion, I looked around and tried to make sense of where I was. Before I realized it, my left hand was faintly glowing. That instantly brought the old obsession back.

Oh, no, this is never going to work. I haven't managed to change anything.

Obeing the dictates of my panic, I made a call with my left-hand phone without carefully checking who I was calling and begged through tears.

"Please...Yukari will die if you don't do something..."

I felt the gasp on the other end. But before the other party could speak, I hung up.

My heart rate was out of control. I wanted to depend on someone. I wanted to ask "me" for help. At this rate, sooner or later Yukari was going to—

"No. Don't run, *me*."

That's right. Do you want to do it all over again?

I breathed shallowly and fast as I attempted to calm myself. After I managed to get a grip, I looked around the room. It was mine. The clock on my desk showed the date of the night when I first got a call from "me." I turned the TV on to be sure. Seeing myself reflected in the dark screen for the first time in a good while, I chuckled to myself. Yes, this was that night. The night preceding the day I told Yukari she should go to America.

Apparently this day was the branch point after all.

Was I being told to do it over from here?

No, I wasn't going to do it over. Nothing had even started.

I couldn't change Yukari's fate. I wasn't qualified to do so. The only one allowed to change Yukari's fate was Yukari herself.

What I could do was... yes, I could support and assist her as a friend. No matter how much it hurt, I didn't think I was allowed to do anything further.

Anyway, I had my own fate to confront, just as Yukari did.

All right. I wouldn't run anymore. I might accept help, but I wouldn't run. I'd go forward.

I breathed in a long breath.

And I hit my left hand against the window glass.

There was a loud clunk, and the glass radially shattered. Cracks branched, forming a spiderweb pattern, from where I'd smashed the window. Feeling a searing heat, I suppressed the cry that came to my lips and looked at my bloody left hand. I felt it pulsating as if it was my heart, as it drenched itself in warm, red blood. It didn't glow no matter how I tried to make it.

Good.

From beyond my room, my mother yelled, "Manabu? What was that?"

I tried to yell back just as loud, but in the end, I answered with a voice with the huskiness of years of disuse. "Uh, sorry. I fell and broke the window pane."

"What?! Manabu, what's wrong with you? Are you okay? You didn't get hurt or anything, did you?"

"No, I'm fine."

Having said that, the bleeding was really something. Maybe I should have gone to the hospital. Or to Yukari's? Either way, I needed to have Yukari do something about this cell phone. It might be my left hand, but I'd better make it so I couldn't use it too easily. This power was too great.

Feeling dizzy, I sat down on my bed. I put my hand on my head. I realized that my memories were steadily fading. It was only natural. The mind of a single human couldn't handle the memories of infinite worlds. Until now, I'd made use of interference with my cell phone so that the infinite brains of the infinite "mes" could manage the information. But now that my cell phone wasn't working—now that I'd stopped it of my own will—my quantum interference ability had returned to that of a normal human being. So all my memories were disappearing, except for those that could be supported by a single person's brain. Or maybe it would be more accurate to say that all the surplus was being snipped away from me? It was a bit sad—I had experienced so much with so many people, after all—but maybe I could reconnect to them when my cell phone was fixed?

Wait, wait, wait...

"Hey! Manabu? Are you listening to me?"

I felt tired, as if I'd just come back from a long trip—and sort of cold.

Why not sleep?

That seems like a good idea. Just sleep. Then I can write it all off as a dream. When I wake up, I'll be myself again. Just sleep...

"Hey! I'm opening the door... Aaah! Manabu? Manabu!"

"Jeez, Mom, what time do you think it is? I'm trying to sleep."

"You idiot! Honey! Call an ambulance! We need an ambulance...!!!"

And so I was rushed off in an ambulance, still wearing my embarrassingly feminine pajamas. I wish it had all been a dream.

So, it's time to end this story the way I said I would.

It was all a dream. A very, very long dream.

But now I have to wake up. In fairy-tale terms—well, I'm not the type to be the princess—but I got kissed.

It feels good to doze, but I can't lie around forever.

Conclusion: About Endings

THE WHOLE NEIGHBORHOOD got a look at my girly pajamas, and I still managed to go to school the next day.

Actually, it's nice they took me to the hospital in an ambulance, but the wound was as shallow as the blood was crazy. Maybe it was because it was my left hand, but they wrapped it up with a ridiculous amount of bandages—honestly, more for the sake of form than anything else—but to a casual observer it probably looked like I got hurt pretty badly.

Yukari was standing in front of the school gate. As soon as she saw me, she ran over, worried. Looking carefully, I noticed Nanami's head in the shadow of the gate. She must have been worrying about me and waiting for me too. I felt bad; it really wasn't a serious injury. I had to be grateful I had these friends, though.

Before I could call out to Yukari as she ran to me, someone spoke to me from behind.

"You look well, nobody. Perhaps it was not bad for a hot-blooded person such as yourself to let out some of your blood."

I sighed and looked behind me. "Morning, Alice. Thanks for the kind words first thing in the morning."

"Oh! Oh! Good morning, Gaku-chan and Alice-chan. Um, Gaku-chan, your hand—"

"Do you not understand irony, nobody? To strike your hand against the glass of your window—I knew you were stupid, but I did not know you had poor eyesight," Alice spat.

"You woke up on the wrong side of the bed this morning, didn't you, Alice? Did I make you worry? Or if you're just trying to pick a fight, I'll take you on. It's your fault that I couldn't sleep and ended up like this."

"What are you referring to?"

"I've been thinking long and hard about what you said to me—about Yukari."

Yukari came to a stop. Alice's expression didn't change, but she was clearly interested in me now.

"So, have you gathered your thoughts? Do you see what you should do for Yukari as a true friend?"

I nodded, "Yes." I turned to face Yukari. "Yukari, I don't want you to go."

"What?" they both asked in stupefaction.

Looking at them, I thought to myself: It may be true that I don't have the power to protect Yukari, who has a special talent. Not from some organization nor from the world itself. But even so—

"Of course, I'll respect what you want, Yukari. And so you know, no matter what you choose, I'm your friend. I always will be," I said. "But I don't want you to go. I'm a kid, and no matter what, at some point the adults are going to want to split us apart for some reason. That's why, right now, when we still have a choice, I don't want you to go. I would do anything to keep you from leaving. I'll do my best for you. Those are my true feelings."

Alice questioned me cuttingly, "*And?* What will you do if that causes Yukari unhappiness?"

I looked at Alice without shame. "I know my desires might hurt her. That's why I won't force this decision on Yukari. Still, I'd like her to give me a chance if she can. This is just what I want, so then, if I get hurt because of Yukari or get exposed to danger, I'll accept that. I'm ready for it. And likewise, maybe Yukari will be exposed to danger because of me. So! I hope Yukari can be ready for that. It might happen. We both might get hurt because of each other. I want her to be with me knowing that. To be with *us*. I want to stand up to things together. That's what I want Yukari to make up her mind about. Of course, if Yukari says she can't handle that responsibility, there's no way I can force it on her..."

"Gaku-chan..."

Alice held back Yukari from saying more and sighed in annoyance. "Hatou, that is a cowardly way of speaking. You are testing Yukari's friendship with your words. Would a true friend test another's friendship? Can you then call yourself Yukari's true friend?"

"Yes, I think so."

“You nobodies! I cannot believe you. Yukari, I want you to consider this objectively. *Friend* is a word that refers to a person who cares for you sincerely. A true friend would celebrate and bless your journey. A person such as this who puts her own desires ahead of that is not a true friend in the least! She surely intends to exploit you and then betray and deny you in time! Inescapably there is a deep, wide rift between geniuses such as us and nobodies such as these, and at some point, inevitably, these—”

I sneered at Alice as she wound up for her diatribe. “You wanna try it, then?”

Alice froze on the spot, and then turned her head like a slow, squeaking machine. “What? Try it? Try...what?”

“I’m saying, why don’t you try thinking of me as your friend, Alice?”

“What...?”

“Like I said. Let’s become friends. Then you’ll see whether I’m lying. You’ll know whether we can’t be friends. Am I wrong?”

Alice was stiff as a board.

I egged her on. “What, are you scared? I’m not.”

“Wh-wh-wh-wh-what are you saying? Do not be impudent, nobody! I am by no means afraid of the likes of you!”

“Really? So you’ll be friends with me? Awesome!”

“No...um...well...it is true that you are a quasi-nobody...but no! I do not trust nobodies! There is no reason I should—”

“Listen, okay, I’m just saying give it a try. Science is all about trial and error. Am I wrong? And anyway, would it matter to you if I betrayed you? I guess you must be scared of me.”

“I am not afraid, and nothing you could do would make me flinch!”

“Okay, then.” I held out my hand.

“I agree!” Yukari interjected. “Alice-chan! I want to ask you the same thing! If you’re going to be my friend, please be friends with Gaku-chan too! Don’t assume it’s impossible! Please! If you think of me as your friend, then please accept my cherished friend...”

For a good while, Alice squinted, groaned, and glared at my

extended hand. Finally, she took a deep, deep breath and said, “Given that Yukari insists so strongly...if this truly must be...then all right. I shall try it. Purely in deference to Yukari, you understand.” She grabbed my fingertip.

Not missing my cue, I grasped her small hand and gave it a hearty shake. “Great. From today, we’re friends! This is great.”

“D-d-d-do not misunderstand! I have no choice but to expose you for the sham you are and awaken Yukari to the true nature—”

Looking around, I noticed that Nanami was gone. I sighed and called back, “It’s time we got to class. Alice, Yukari.”

“We are not yet on enough familiar terms for you to drop the *-san*, nobody!”

“When has that ever been a thing here, foreigner?”

Oh, it was this easy all along.

With my opposite hand I held Yukari’s, while Alice blushed yet didn’t shake off my hand. That made me grin as I thought, *That’s right. If you have no power, you can just ask for help. If someone else needs help, you can extend your hand to them. You can meet and start anew.*

I’d really taken the long way here, yet looking back at it, it seemed like it had gone by in a flash.

“By the way, guys, do you know Fermat’s principle? Tenjou told me about it.”

“Oh! Oh! Fermat?”

“Of course I do. I am a genius. Fermat’s principle in essence is—”

The path shown by the light.



If





WHEN YOU START THINKING that it's warm, then it rains, and when you're thinking that a bitter wind has really brought in the cold days, then the warm days come back. We have an idiom for that kind of weather, "three cold, four warm," and it's supposed to be a sign that spring is coming. Thinking about it that way, the cycle of warm and cold is as if spring is walking in little by little nervously, and it makes it kind of fun.

Getting into March, it's a good time to see full-bloom plum flowers in my neighborhood. I'm not girly enough to go around admiring them, but from the front of Yukari's house you can see a bunch of them in the distance like mist. The sight steals my breath away.

It was night. The air was moist, and there was no moon in the sky.

"Oh! Gaku-chan, there you are." Yukari came from behind and sat beside me.

"Yeah... Flowers at night are pretty, aren't they? I like that faint glow they give." I'd looked at this view in the daytime, in the evening, and now, after the sun had set, and I did think it was prettiest at night.

"Yeah, actually, they light them up over there at night."

"Oh... Okay, I get it. Where's Tenjou and...?"

"At the back door picking on Kasoku-kun, who came to deliver sake. Why does Ten-chan always pick on Kasoku-kun so much? And lately Alice-chan's been joining her. You know, Kasoku-kun is actually a really nice guy. He's kind and reliable..."

"Don't...worry about Kasoku. Didn't you say he had amazing drills?"

"Ngh. You don't stand up for Kasoku-kun either. Should I not have told you about his drills? Could it be that everyone is jealous of his drills? They are pretty dreamy, but..."

"Okay. I'll tell Tenjou and Alice you said that."

"H-huh?"

Yukari didn't leave. This spring, she'd enter her third year of junior high with us. What I was worried about most now was whether we'd still be in the same class in the new school year.

I vaguely remember that in another world we were in the same class. (By the way, I had her seal away the calling feature of my left hand. I guess because of that, that “dream” had become really like a dream. I thought about taking out the cell phone itself, but I didn’t ask her to do that. After all, this left hand of mine was my bond with Yukari and the other “mes”.) That said, I couldn’t take it for granted. Especially given the confounding factor.

“But isn’t it great? We’ll be third-years with Alice-chan!”

“Yeah, yeah, sure.”

It turned out that Alice was going to stay at our school through the change of year. Originally, I understand she was planning to go back to Jaunt by the time we had the closing ceremony for the third term, but I guess she had some kind of change of heart, because in any case I heard she was extending her stay. Yukari was very happy about that, and I, well, sure, I was happy. Though Alice was still calling me a nobody on the daily and trying to judge whether I was worthy of being called a true friend.

(I’d say we were doing pretty well for all that.)

Alice and Nanami seemed to get along, perhaps because of their common perverse nature. This helped Nanami gradually start to interact normally with Yukari, which made Yukari plenty happy too.

Spring had nearly arrived: it would be the first time I would see winter turn to spring with not only Yukari but Nanami and Alice too. I had a feeling that this year would be even more fun than the last. I hoped we would be in the same class.

Gazing at the distant plum blossoms, floating illuminated in the night, I felt as if I was looking at something not of this world, peeking into the peach blossom spring.

Then I noticed Yukari looking at me. “What?”

Yukari shook her head. “Nothing.” She looked down and picked up one of the model robots dotting the veranda.

I naturally stared at it too.

Oh, yeah, weren’t these robots moving when that thing happened? Fighting to protect Yukari, looking at me as if concerned... I asked Yukari about it, and she brushed it off as my imagination, but I don’t think I could have mistaken anything else for that...

“Um, Gaku-chan?”

“Uh-huh?”

Yukari didn't cast her purple eyes at me. She kept them glued to the robot in her hands as she dropped out the words, “Thank you.”

“Uh...for what?”

“Well, lots of stuff.” Yukari smiled.

She softly kissed the robot in the palms of her hands.

I watched her lips brush against it.

And for some reason, I felt unbearably embarrassed.

Afterword

THIS WORK STARTED as a short story I wrote for a project for a special November issue of *Dengeki Bunko Magazine*. It was to be a collaboration with the manga artist Shirou Tsunashima. The editor gave us the theme of “robots and girls,” and yes, I gave it my all. I’m sure you understand this if you’ve already read the story, but this work features nothing but robots and girls (at least from a certain point of view). If I do say so myself, I did some good work here. It’s not necessarily because of that, but I have a strange attachment to this story. Ever since I wrote it, I’ve hoped that I’d be able to make a full book out of it. And here we are!

We even got Shirou Tsunashima to keep doing the art. He’s a pro with serialized manga, so I wasn’t necessarily expecting to get illustrations within the text, but when I opened the box, there were opening illustrations, interior illustrations, and even bonus material! I’m so grateful he did so much for an author like me who had him design robots for the aforementioned theme of “robots and girls” and then told him not to use the robot designs after all (since it wouldn’t make sense for the main character to see them). Apparently, we might include those robot designs as a bonus at the end of the book. Honestly, I think I might be happier than the readers about all this. I’m so glad fate brought us together.

So, we have the three sections in this story:

“This and That About Marii” (published in the magazine as “Qualia the Purple”).

“Kiss Over One Billion.”

“If.”

Frankly, I did wonder whether two stories and an epilogue would be enough, but after seeing what the illustrator drew for the title pages, I was fully convinced that yes, these three sections were enough—anything more would be superfluous. Of course, you may be able to see what I’m talking about when you read it, but there’s an insurmountable

difference between “You’ll see when you read it” and “You’ll understand when you see it,” which I’ve run into many times with other works. I’m envious of the at-a-glance persuasiveness visual art has.

(Prose does have its own strengths, but that’s an entirely different story.)

When we see something, unmistakably, we receive more information than meets the eye. We don’t even realize this. To be precise, it’s not that we’re not aware of it because it’s not necessary, but rather, things look like something to us because it’s necessary that they look like *something*.

This work is a drama that starts from that something.

Thus, what you have here is a funny little story that came into being by coincidence from an assignment. *Qualia the Purple*, saved by serendipity and opportunity—I now deliver it to you. Whether you’ve already read it or you’re going to read it now, I hope you’ll enjoy it.

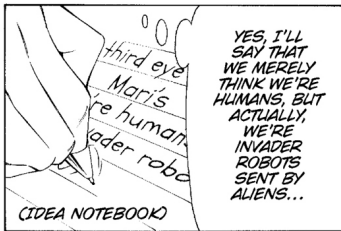
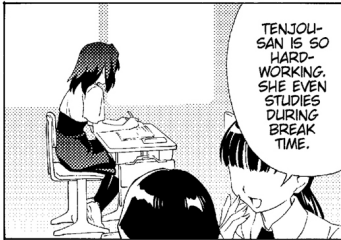
With fondest regards,

Hisamitsu Ueo

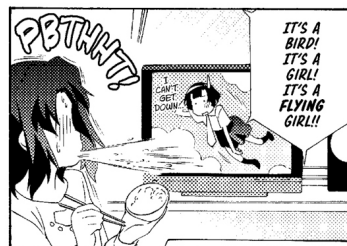
4-Panel Comics

MANGA BY SHIROU TSUNASHIMA

TENJOU NOTE

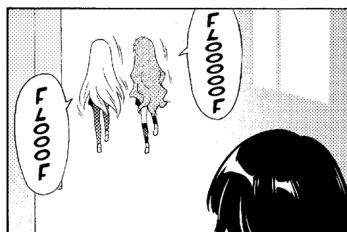


GAKU-CHAN IN FLIGHT MODE

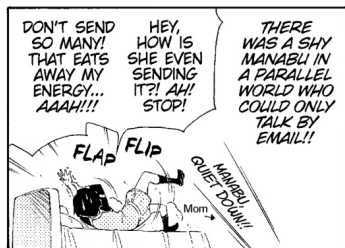


It's a Book! BONUS PROJECT #1

YUKARI & ALICE FROM BEHIND

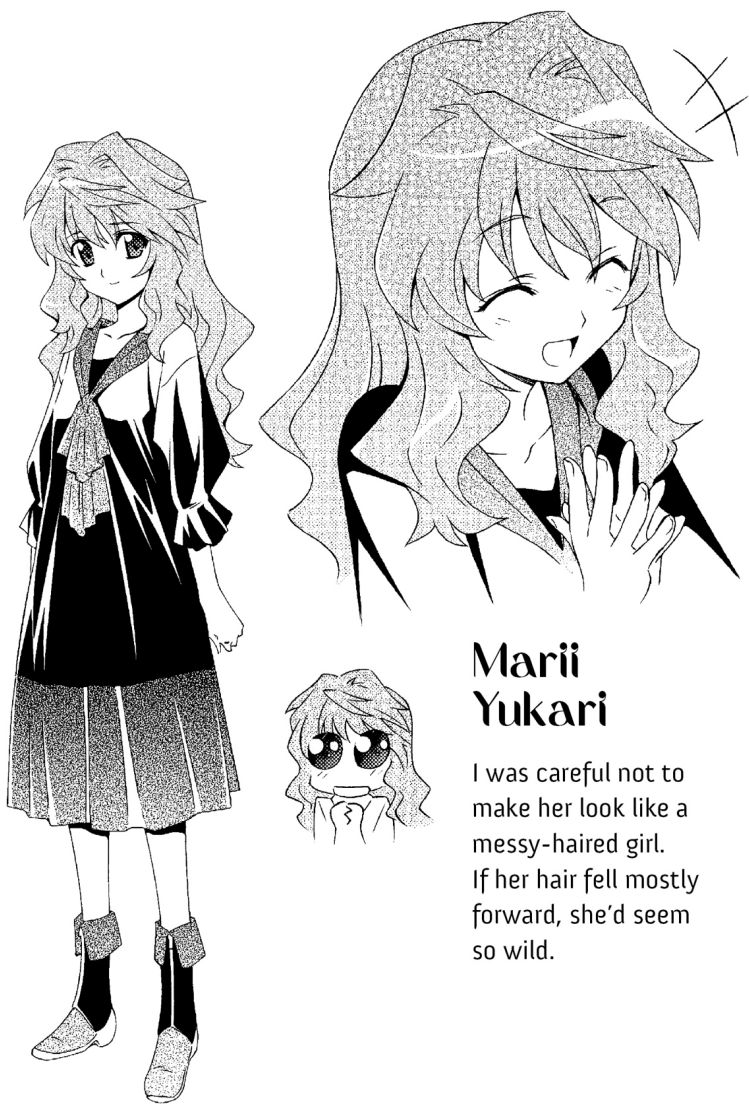


LEFT-HAND CELL PHONE



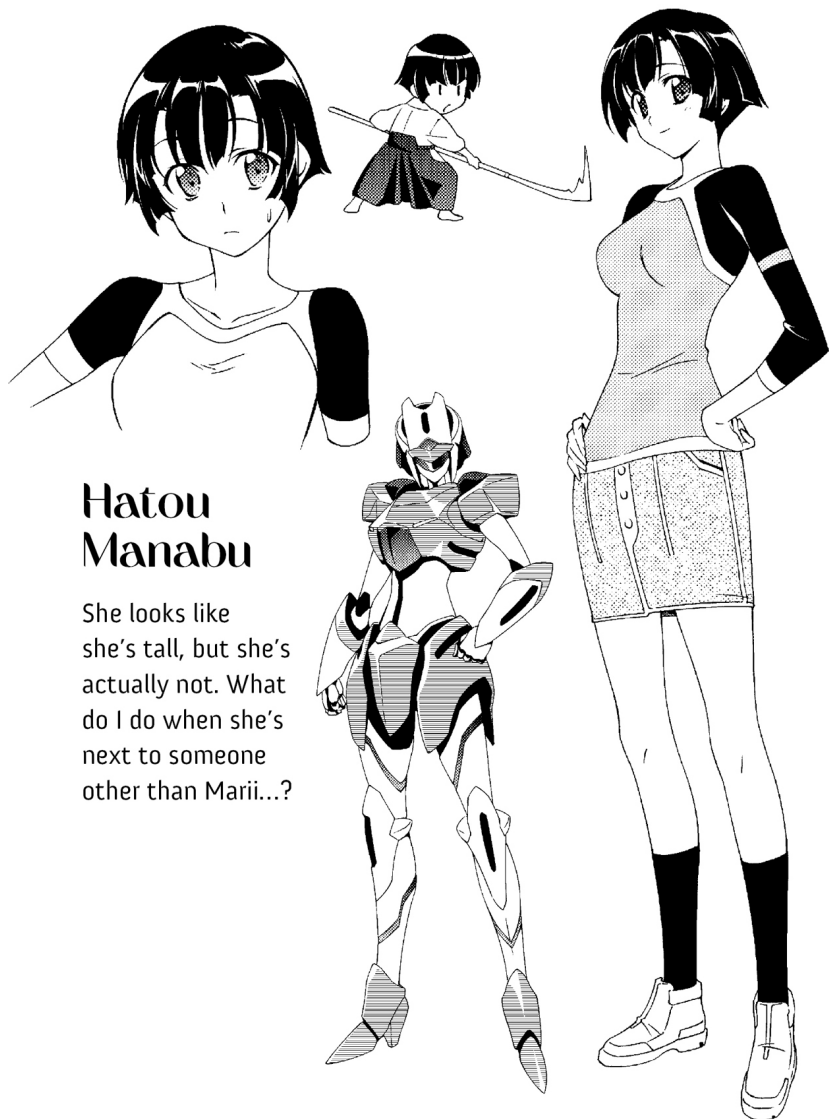
Character Designs

ART AND COMMENTS BY SHIROU TSUNASHIMA



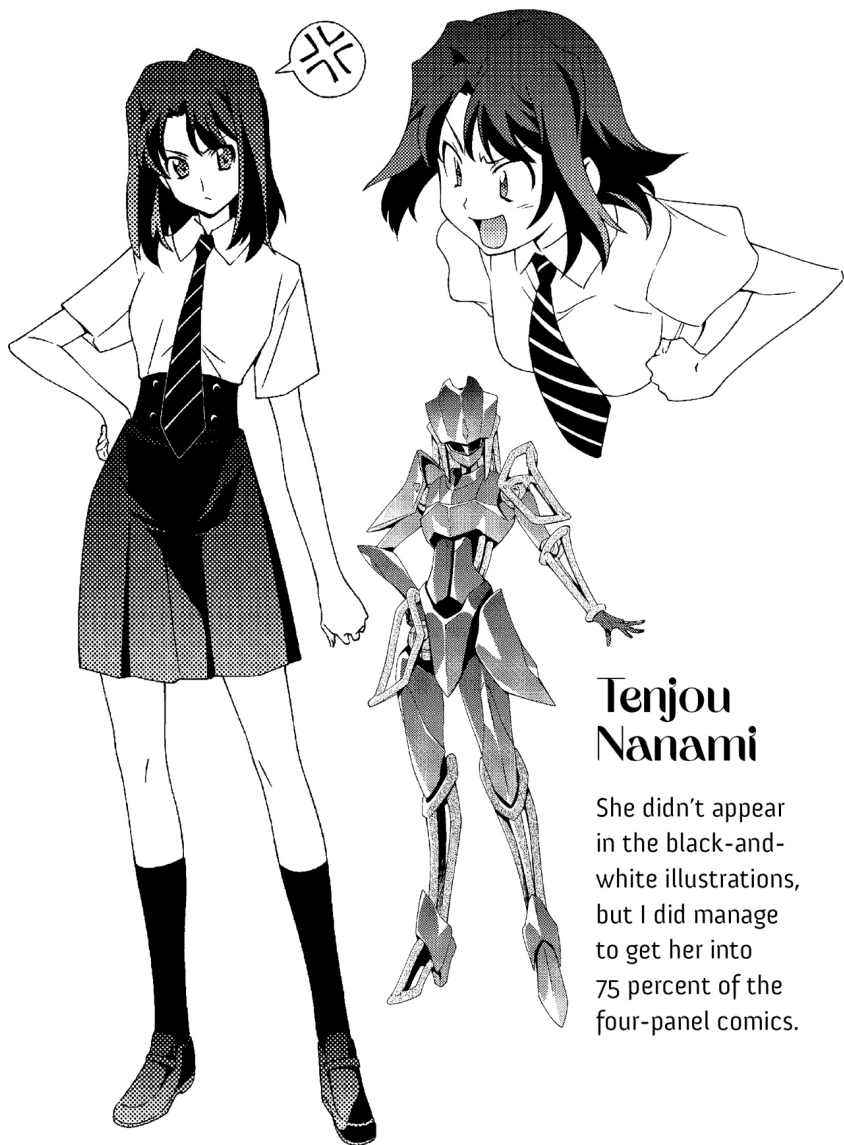
**Marii
Yukari**

I was careful not to make her look like a messy-haired girl. If her hair fell mostly forward, she'd seem so wild.



Hatou Manabu

She looks like she's tall, but she's actually not. What do I do when she's next to someone other than Marii...?

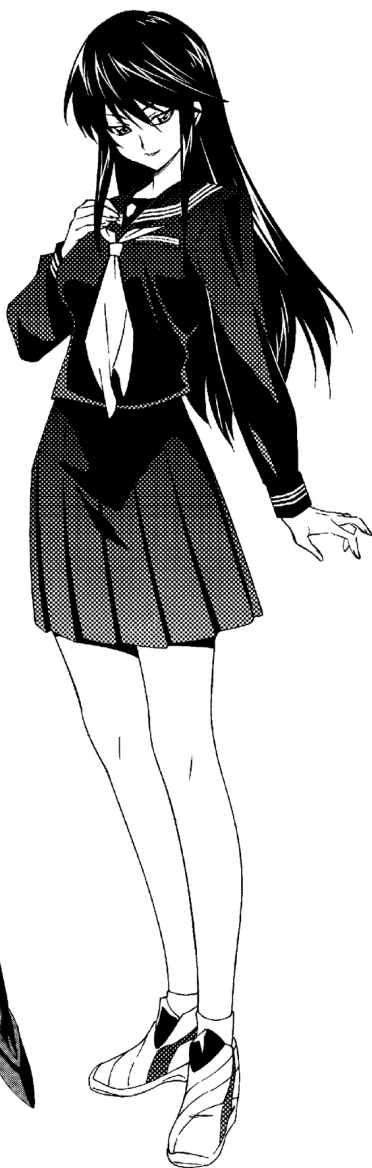
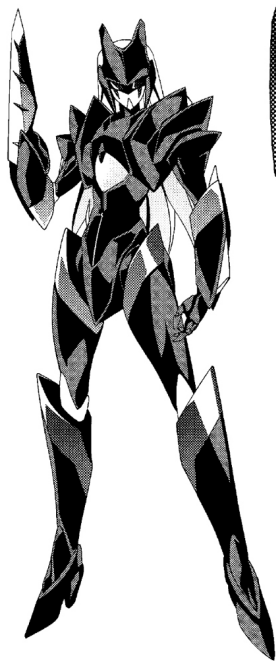


Tenjou Nanami

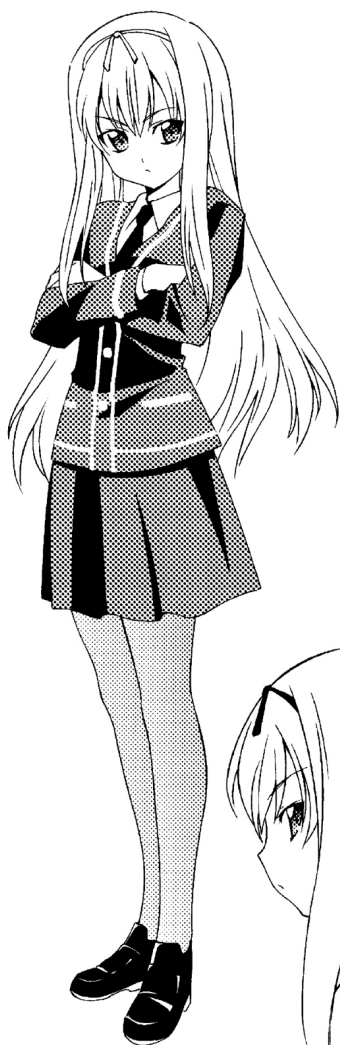
She didn't appear in the black-and-white illustrations, but I did manage to get her into 75 percent of the four-panel comics.

Serial Killer?

My rough design
had her in gym
clothes, but I think
she looks creepier
in a sailor suit.



CHARACTER DESIGNS



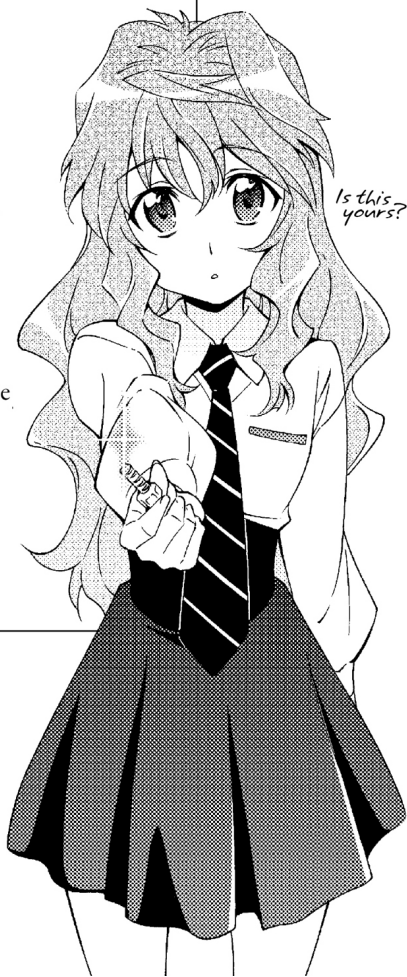
**Alice
Foyle**

Can you see the
sass on her face?
It's funny how she
talks to people.
I wanted to draw
her more.

Postscript

People look like robots to Marii...
Fiction aside, nobody knows how
anyone sees anyone, do they?
Mirrors and photographs only
represent your own knowledge, and
common sense is something created
after the fact by humans. Now I feel
afraid to look people in the eyes,
and at the same time, I feel hopeful.
That's the kind of work this is. I hope
this book reaches a lot of people.
Oh, that's my screw!

Shirou Tsunashima



About the Creators

HISAMITSU UEO | AUTHOR

You can get by in life with no problem, even if you don't know the word *qualia*. There are many things like that in the world. They're all over the place! But this book exists because I encountered the word *qualia*. The world is full of that kind of serendipity.

SHIROU TSUNASHIMA | ILLUSTRATOR

Born December 14, 1978. From Okayama Prefecture. A manga artist and illustrator with a solid reputation for his depiction of robots. Known for the *Jinki* series.



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